

## A LOUSE FOR THE HANGMAN

Mr Gorringer, headmaster of the highly-respected Queen's School, Newminster, disapproved of the publicity brought to his school by the extra-curricular activities of its amateur-detective history master, Carolus Deene. But when Lord Penge, a friend of long standing and a very rich one too, started to receive threatening letters, the headmaster decided to make an exception, and asked Carolus to investigate. The letters threatened death to Lord Penge, but it was Michael Ratchett, his secretary, who was found shot in the park of the Penges' luxurious house, Highearth Manor. Ratchett was found to be wearing Lord Penge's overcoat—had the murderer made a mistake and shot the wrong man?

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DEAD MAN'S SHOES

A Louse  
For the Hangman

*by*

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*Helter skelter, hang sorrow, care'll kill a cat,  
up-tails all, and a louse for the hangman.*

BEN JONSON  
*Every Man in His Humour*



# 1

PERHAPS the strangest and certainly the most mystifying of Carolus Deene's cases came to him in an unexpected way. It was recommended to him by Mr Gorringer, the headmaster of the school at which Carolus taught history.

Now Mr Gorringer, a large and important-looking man, appreciated the ability of Carolus to badger and cajole his pupils through examinations. He also knew that the book Carolus had written, *Who Killed William Rufus? And Other Mysteries of History*, had brought a certain *éclat* to the name of the Queen's School, Newminster. He was in no way dismayed by Carolus's vulgarly large private income and Bentley Continental motor-car. But he disapproved of his history master's excursions into criminal investigation. They had more than once given the school a kind of publicity which Mr Gorringer considered unsuitable. As headmaster of a minor public school he was very sensitive on this point and usually felt alarm when there came to his ears a rumour that Carolus was taking an interest in some recent murder. These ears of the headmaster's were large and apparently sensitive organs, since everything reached their great, red-rimmed and hairy cavities sooner or later.

Yet in the Highcastle Case it was Mr Gorringer himself who suggested to Carolus that he should investigate. About a week before the end of an Easter term he broached the matter. Carolus was making his way to the Common Room when the school porter, breathing heavily and looking more bad-tempered than usual, caught him up.

"He wants you," he said. This, to Carolus, was perfectly explicit and he would have left the matter at that, but Muggeridge, the porter, had a grievance. "I was just

having my tea," he grumbled. "He's always ringing that blasted bell. I don't know."

The last three words were spoken with something like despair.

"All right, Muggeridge. I'll go across."

Carolus found Mr Gorringer at his large and very solid Victorian writing-table which faced the door.

"Ah, Deene," he said. "I wanted a word with you. Please sit down."

Mr Gorringer paused, coughed and joined the tips of his fingers.

"I have received a letter," he announced at last, "from Lord Penge."

"Arthur Briggs, wasn't he? Bloater paste and so on?"

"It is true that the family name of Lord Penge is Briggs," admitted Mr Gorringer, "and that among his multifarious financial interests has been the manufacture of certain table delicacies of high quality. Since he was raised to the peerage, however, his activities have been largely political or connected with public charities."

"They all come to that," said Carolus irritatingly.

Mr Gorringer appeared to ignore the remark.

"My friendship with Lord Penge dates back to our undergraduate days," he said. "As I say, he has just written to me, and I propose to show you the letter."

He handed to Carolus a large sheet of deckle-edged writing-paper stamped with a coronet and bearing the address Highcastle Manor, Sussex.

"Dear Flippers," Carolus was astounded to read.

"You did say it was addressed to you?" he questioned the headmaster, studiously keeping his glance from those robust ears.

Mr Gorringer stretched out a hand for the letter. It seemed that he had forgotten some details of its terminology.

"On second thoughts I will summarize its contents for you. Lord Penge has been greatly perturbed of late by the receipt of a number of anonymous letters threatening his

life. He has summoned the police, but finds that they do not treat the matter as being of sufficient gravity. They inform him that it is quite a common thing for public men to receive such letters from cranks. They are investigating, of course, but Lord Penge is not satisfied. In a matter so vital he feels that no effort should be spared to discover the sender of these letters. He has therefore written to me."

"Why to you, Headmaster?"

"It happened that at a recent public dinner I sat next to Lord Penge and gave him some account of your interest in crime. I even went so far as to outline one or two of your discoveries. He wishes me to let you know that he will give you an interview tomorrow, Sunday, at Highcastle Manor."

"I'm sorry. I'm playing golf on Sunday."

"That you can of course postpone. Lord Penge says it will be convenient for you to call any time between three and five."

Carolus stood up.

"Tell him I can't make it, will you, Headmaster? The case doesn't interest me in the least."

"Mr Deene," said the headmaster solemnly. "You have repeatedly embroiled yourself in matters far better left to the officials trained to deal with them. You have positively sought out the most sordid crimes as subjects fit for investigation. Yet when you are approached by a peer of the realm you claim to feel no interest in the matter. Is not that perverse, to say the least of it?"

"I don't think so. I'm afraid you and I don't always see things in the same light, Headmaster. Now I wanted to speak to you about the Junior Sixth . . ."

"The Junior Sixth is of less consequence than the matter we are discussing, Mr Deene," said Mr Gorringer surprisingly. "I must make known to you my wish, my very earnest wish, that you should undertake an investigation in this case. You surely do not intend to show the same callousness as the police force? Suppose that the writer

of these letters fulfils his threat and Lord Penge falls a victim to him, you would almost have his blood on your hands!"

"Come now, Headmaster. Don't let's be melodramatic about it. Is there any theory to account for these letters? Any guess at why they are sent?"

"None whatever, I believe. Lord Penge himself considers that the writer is insane."

"Why, I wonder? Does he think it impossible that a sane man should want to kill him?"

"It would seem improbable. Lord Penge is almost universally respected and liked. Indeed, one might say beloved. But apart from that, in one of the letters the writer says something to the effect that he wouldn't mind a few years at Broadmoor for the pleasure of eliminating Lord Penge. You perceive the seriousness of it?"

"Yes. It does sound a bit tricky. But not my cup of tea, Headmaster. Really not. I am sorry not to oblige you, but if I do anything during the coming holidays it will be that Chatham affair."

"Mr Deene, is it possible that you are contemplating anything so wholly unsuited to your position? I have glanced at newspaper accounts of the crime to which you refer: a woman of low morals found in the gutter in a notorious district of a naval port, her throat cut and her shoes missing . . ."

"Yes. It's the shoes that make it interesting. Now why do you suppose they were missing?"

"I would not venture to surmise or to give my attention to such a detail. If you, Mr Deene, intend to speculate in that very sordid field while my old friend and a most distinguished man is murdered, I abandon all hope of appealing to your conscience. I . . ."

The telephone rang.

"Yes," the headmaster said; "yes indeed. No, unfortunately he has other unavoidable commitments, he tells me. I will. Of course. *Really?* Oh, I agree that is most

alarming. *Most* alarming. You have? You are cautious, I trust? Yes, I will speak to him again. Good-bye."

Mr Gorringer replaced the receiver and turned to Carolus.

"That was Lord Penge," he said superfluously. "A most disturbing thing has happened. He has received another of these letters, and this one, instead of being posted in London, like the previous ones, was posted in Highcastle itself."

"Coming nearer home, eh? Is Penge scared?"

"He rarely betrays emotion in speech or manner, but I imagine anyone would be. I have told him I will approach you again, Deene." Carolus noticed the abandonment of the formal 'Mr' and knew that the headmaster was about to become ponderously man-to-man. "Let us cease this somewhat pointless argument. I trust I may tell Lord Penge that you will call on him tomorrow?"

"I'm afraid I should be quite useless to him if I did. I'm not really interested in any case till there's a corpse, you see. Your friend needs a good bodyguard, if he needs anything. That's not my line. If you offered me a murder to investigate I would go to see the man, but not for anonymous letter-writing."

Mr Gorringer rose to his feet.

"I find that heartless, and in so far as Lord Penge is a friend of mine, your reply seems almost a personal affront to your headmaster. I shall not ask you again. If there is a corpse at Highcastle it should trouble your conscience for the rest of your life. No. Not a word more. The matter is closed."

"Quite. Now the Junior Sixth . . ."

Yet in spite of his refusal to concern himself with the menaces to Lord Penge, Carolus that evening looked up the peer's name in various reference books and read details of his career with close attention.

Arthur Briggs was born in 1890, the son of Alfred and Rachel Briggs. It would seem that his father was already a substantial man of business, for Arthur received an education

which, though not as expensive as could be found, was none the less that of a son of well-to-do parents. He was sent to a preparatory school at Eastbourne, then to St John's, Leatherhead, and had taken the degree of B.Sc. at the University of London.

After that he had spent two years in Buenos Aires 'for business experience and research', returning to England for the First World War. He was pronounced medically unfit for military service and at once began to devote himself to his family business.

It was from no public reference book, but from his own memory of a story told him some years before, that Carolus knew what form this 'devotion' had taken. His father had several grocery shops and a small factory in Newington Butts, where he made certain potted meats and fish paste. His trademark, which depicted an archer shooting a deer, had given a name to his products, though Archer and Buck's meat pastes were not yet widely known.

Young Arthur, working with a chemist, made a discovery which has since revolutionized the industry. It was that to use any substantial quantity of the meat or fish after which the paste is touchingly called in the manufacture of it is sheer wilful waste. Cereals can do duty for everything from boar's head to partridge, from salmon to chicken and ham, and provided the product can be proved to contain some minute proportion of the fish or beast which gives it a name, and is suitably coloured and flavoured, all is well. This enabled Arthur Briggs not only to cut the costs of his productions down to a fraction of their previous total, but also to add some enticing items to his lists. His Wild Duck Paste and Venison Pâté caught the purchaser's eye by their titles, his pastes of Lobster, Ptarmigan, Quail and Golden Pheasant scarcely less so.

But apart from these exotic-sounding products, he was able to sell to a needy country during the First World War such vast quantities of manufactured foodstuffs that before his business was struck by the calamity of the Armistice he



had fourteen factories working at full blast and was a millionaire. His father had been wise enough to retire soon after Arthur came into the business, and died in 1920 at the large, gloomy home in Penge which Arthur had bought for him.

For some years after the old man's death Arthur continued to live with his mother at Penge, and it was during this time, indeed before he was forty, that he purchased for himself a peerage. Six years later he married Alithia, the only daughter of Sir Albert Nutter, a fellow manufacturer of foodstuffs whose career had been scarcely less spectacular than his own and of a similar kind, for to Nutter the world owes the discovery that shredded mangel-wurzels obviate the necessity for more than a flavouring of oranges and lemons in orange and lemon squashes.

Carolus found from his reference book that there were two sons and one daughter of this marriage, and that Lord Penge's heir was Eustace Briggs, his eldest son. There was an impressive list of functions and achievements set down for Lord Penge. He had been a Member of the Agricultural Marketing Facilities Committee, Chairman of the Food Preservatives Enquiry Commission, Honorary Liveryman and later Master of the Worshipful Company of Spice-Merchants, Alderman of the Ward of Fleet and one of Her Majesty's Lieutenants of the City of London, Member of the Council of the Royal London Discharged Prisoners' Aid Society, and a great many more. He had published a book, *Purity in Food Preservation*. His address was given as High-castle Manor, Sussex (Telegraphic Address: *Pengecastle*). His club was the Garrick.

Carolus did not find this record inspiring and he still felt no curiosity in the matter of the threats Lord Penge was receiving. He agreed with the police that such things were not unusual, particularly towards a man who had risen by the way of this one.

But a few days later, indeed on the last day but one of the term, he was astonished on looking from the window of his

classroom during a lesson period to see the headmaster coming across the quadrangle at a pace that could almost be called a run, gowned, but without his mortar-board. In a moment he was in Carolus's classroom.

"Deene!" he called. There was none of the usual "One moment, Mr Deene, if you could spare it". The headmaster's monosyllable was stern and impatient. Carolus left the classroom with him.

Mr Gorringer was almost incoherent.

"That matter the other day . . . Lord Penge . . . a most terrible thing has happened . . ."

"They've got him?" queried Carolus calmly.

"No, no. Thank heavens, not *that*—at least as yet. No, his secretary was fortunately mistaken for him. He was wearing Lord Penge's overcoat, in fact. Shot, Deene, shot! Dead, man! And in the very grounds of Highcastle Manor!"

"Did you say 'fortunately', Headmaster?"

"I meant—well, comparatively speaking in the circumstances. The nation cannot afford to lose men of Lord Penge's calibre. It is tragic, of course, about the secretary. A very worthy fellow, I believe. But imagine how you would have felt if it had been Lord Penge!"

"Yes. I can imagine that," said Carolus.

Mr Gorringer was unaware of any irony.

"You must go now, of course," he said. "You must go without delay. The murderer will not make the same mistake twice."

"Scarcely likely," agreed Carolus. "The secretary will presumably be buried."

"You understand perfectly what I mean. You will leave for Highcastle tomorrow?"

"I'm still not keen, Headmaster. My last case concerned a man shot in a park, if you remember. I think I should prefer the Chatham job."

"Deene, you yourself said that if there were a corpse . . . Come, man, will you go?"

"I suppose so. There is no doubt that the secretary was murdered?"

"Oh, none. He was shot in the back."

"There has been no arrest?"

"None."

"Very well, Headmaster. I'll go."

Mr Gorringer slightly bowed his head.

"It may be that I shall join you at Highcastle later," he said solemnly. "Meanwhile, with all my heart I wish you success."     "

## 2

EVEN BEFORE he saw Highcastle Manor, Carolus was conscious that the whole case and his own conduct abounded in false pretences. He was going down to investigate a murder, and Lord Penge supposed that he was coming to prevent one. The character of Penge and his achievements, if they were not false, were certainly pretentious, and from all accounts his home was a nightmare of skilled restoration by experts in period decoration—the kind of thing that Carolus most detested.

The lodge gates were unlocked for him by a man who scrutinized him and his car carefully but asked no question. When Carolus saw the house and gardens his worst fears were realized. The house was quite perfect, not a brick or a mullion out of keeping, not a doorway or a chimney-stack but proclaimed that it was the work of Vanbrugh, a smaller but no less perfectly proportioned Blenheim. It even had the two-storey columns in a similarly imposing entrance. But, as Ruskin said, "Restoration is a lie."

At each side of the house were twin formal Italian gardens in which the very flowers were in period, but from the entrance itself one looked across the park and saw that it had been skilfully treated to appear to reach the skyline. The trees were so 'placed' as the park rolled back that they can only have been the single ones and groups carefully selected and left growing when those surrounding them had been cut down.

Yes, everything was perfect, everything appeared to be 'right' and in harmony with the rest, and the resulting impression to one viewing the place in the mid-twentieth century was something unspeakably false, even a little

ridiculous. This superb building, superbly set, was so anomalous, so anachronistic, that its beauty could scarcely be seen. It was like a lovely woman made for throne or stage or ballroom being jostled and swayed as she was strap-hanging in an underground train.

Before he rang at the door, Carolus knew that the interior would continue the theme. But he did not expect the sight which confronted him. A footman in livery opened the door within a few moments of his ring and behaved as though his antique appearance was a commonplace, as though Carolus were somewhat gauche and ignorant to look at him with a little unconcealable surprise.

"His Lordship ordered that you should be shown in to him at once, sir. He is in the library."

Carolus had time to look about him as they went, at the all-too-perfect furniture, the quite genuine armour and the magnificent tapestries. This was not a home, he decided, it was a film-set designed for an over-conscientious director. It was hideously right. Each item had been a matter for debate between experts. It was stamped with studied period and design.

Lord Penge himself was far less out of keeping with his home than one would have supposed from his story. He was not a big man, purple and blustering, he was not in manner arrogant or vulgar. He was of medium height with an open, rather intelligent face, a clipped moustache and a good forehead. His figure was spare and his movements decisive. His clothes were well made but not conspicuous, his presence that—perhaps—of a science master at a public school, a permanent official in the Home Office, or even possibly a solicitor who specialized in conveyancing.

"I am very glad you were able to come," he said quietly. "It's a wretched business, and I feel I need help from an expert."

That, Carolus considered, was what this man had always had, and it might be the secret of his success. Working with a chemist he had made his discoveries in preserving food,

and one did not have to look much at his home to realize that he had known, in restoring and furnishing it, as perhaps in everything else in life, when to rely on the specialist.

"The police are now thoroughly concerned and working hard to clear up the mystery, but until poor Ratchett was killed they didn't seem very worried. I cannot help feeling that if they had shown the same energy a little earlier the thing might never have happened. However, to be fair, we were not so very worried ourselves."

"How *did* it happen?" Carolus asked.

"I have every intention of telling you," said Lord Penge. "Gorringer, who has moments of shrewdness in spite of his pomposity, believes that you are the one man who can clear this up. So let me give what details I can. I will start with these anonymous letters. The police have them now, so I cannot show them to you, but I gather not much is to be learnt from the actual documents. The first came about a month ago. It was typewritten, with one or two slight typing errors, but was not misspelt or ungrammatical."

"On what day of the week did it arrive?"

Lord Penge looked at Carolus as though to see if he was serious.

"Is that important? I don't remember the day, but it was in the middle of the week. Not a Saturday, Sunday or Monday. It had been posted in the London W.1 postal district. It was on paper which the police say is sold at every branch of one of the great chain stationers. The typewriter used was a common type, a Hemington portable of an old model."

"And the words?"

"I have not a copy, but something like this. 'To Lord Penge. You've had it. You know why. I am going to kill you myself. Spider.' I think that is exact."

"Will you try to tell me what were your reactions to this and what steps you took?"

"Certainly. I was not very concerned. I have received anonymous letters before and have learned not to take them

too seriously. But I was curious. I think the words 'you know why' caused that. Because, you see, I did *not* know why. I could not think why anyone should want to kill me. It was the most perplexing part of the affair. I have no enemies, of that kind, anyway. Business rivals, persons with fancied grievances; we all have those, I expect. But to my knowledge there was no one with any reason to wish for my death."

"Who will benefit from it financially?" asked Carolus.

"My will, you mean? My own family and dependants. No one else. My wife. My two sons. Certain of the servants."

"What about your secretary?"

"Michael Ratchett? No. On the contrary. He had been with me for twelve years, since he came out of the army, and was a personal friend as well as a secretary. About six months ago I began to put into action a scheme advocated by my accountants to avoid the payment of excessive death duties by my heirs. I made a gift of capital to Michael of five thousand pounds. If I die within five years of that, death duties will be payable. If not the sum belongs entirely to him—or rather to his estate. It was my intention to do the same for my wife and sons, on a rather larger scale. But it takes time to make the capital disposable in each case. I started with Michael because his was the smallest. Now to return to these letters. There were altogether three of them posted in London, and all were identical in note-paper, envelope and, the police informed me, type. The words were similar, with the addition of phrases like—'Don't think I have forgotten because I have been delayed', 'It won't be long now', and so on."

"What did you do about them?"

"Showed them to the police. That is, after receiving the second one. They began to seem rather more dangerous to me because they were probably the work of a madman. No sane man who intended to murder me would surely give me notice of the fact beforehand. What object could he have

in doing so? And no sane man who did not intend to murder me would send these letters."

"No. But there are degrees of insanity. Some idiot might think it was funny. However, that does not seem to have been the explanation. Please go on."

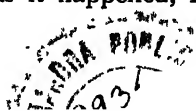
"When the third arrived I really felt I ought to take it seriously. My son even wanted me to hire a bodyguard, but that, I imagined, would be an awful nuisance and probably not very effective. I remembered Gorringer telling me about you and asked him to invite you to look into the case. Then the fourth letter arrived, posted here in the village. Of this I have a copy."

Lord Penge crossed the room to a bureau, of which he unlocked a drawer. Carolus read the odd words on the paper handed to him. 'Lord Penge. I have come for you now. Useless to skulk in your house; I am everywhere. Count your hours and say your prayers. You know why. Spider.'

"Incidentally, the words 'you know why' were repeated in each of the letters. This time I began to be really perturbed. I am not an easily frightened man, but there was something about these letters, suggesting the obsession of a madman, which could no longer be treated lightly. When I say I was perturbed I don't want you to think it made any difference to our life here. We had not got to the point of visualising anyone hanging about trying to take a pot at me. This one arrived, by the way, on the Saturday morning."

"I wonder whether the police have asked you to give them what details you can about the movements of members of your household on the previous day?"

"They certainly have not. I really don't think you need consider the members of my household in connection with these letters. I've no wish to limit your enquiries in any way, but there are limits of probability. If you want to know which of them could have posted a letter that day you must ask them, because, as it happened, I was





out most of the day. It must have been six-thirty before I was home, so I know little or nothing of anyone's movements."

"You drive yourself, I suppose?"

"No. I cannot drive. For some reason I have never learnt, and Gribbley, my chauffeur, invariably takes me. At a rough guess I should imagine that almost everyone here could have posted a letter that day, but of course none of them did. It's unthinkable, as you'll see when you come to meet them."

"I expect so. May we go straight to the day before yesterday, wasn't it? When Ratchett was killed?"

"Certainly. He came here at about five o'clock. It chanced that my son met him in the village and drove him up, so he was without his own car here, which was unusual. He had one of the two lodges at the East entrance of the park, not beside the gates you would have come in by today. He was a bachelor and lived alone. Mrs Carker, the head gardener's wife, who lives in the other lodge across the drive from him, cleaned his house, and he had most of his meals here.

"On most days at about four or five he would come here to work with me on the book I am writing, though on occasion we have worked in his cottage. I go up to town three or four times a week, but I never stay more than an hour or so and am usually here at about three or four o'clock. So it was my habit to work with Michael after tea sometimes till eight o'clock, but usually till six-thirty or seven. Dinner is at eight-thirty. I detest the modern tendency to eat in the early evening before one has digested lunch.

"On Wednesday Michael arrived at a little before five and we came into this room at once to work. My orders to the staff are that in no circumstances short of a matter of life and death are we to be disturbed here while we are working, so we usually get a good deal done in the short time we have. That day we were deep in it for a couple of hours when Michael realized that we should need a file

which was over at his cottage. He kept a good deal of our material there because he often worked at night.

“ ‘It’s a pity I didn’t bring the car,’ he said, ‘but it won’t take me long to go across.’ As you see, there are french windows here, and he opened these to take the shortest way to his house. ‘My goodness, it’s dark early tonight,’ he said, ‘and cold too.’ There is a little cloakroom through that door and I had an old overcoat there which I slip on to take a turn in the garden sometimes. I offered it to Michael and he put it on. We were almost identical in build and height and it fitted him. He said something like ‘Shan’t be long’, and was gone.

“I need scarcely say that it never occurred to us that the writer of the anonymous letters might be at hand. It’s easy to say now that we should have considered that, but you see the man had not become a physical threat exactly. We had not got to the point of imagining a real murderer waiting behind a tree. But there was another thing which I see now should have occurred to me. For the sake of my health I have taken to having a walk before dinner at night and in recent weeks have often made this to Michael’s cottage, having a drink with him there and returning to dinner.

“I went on with my work. The police have asked me with great pertinacity how long it was before I heard the shots, but I find it extremely hard to say. Certainly not more than five minutes, perhaps much less.”

“How many shots?”

“Two.”

“What did you do?”

“For the first time that afternoon I thought of the threatening letter writer. The possibility at once occurred to me that he had fired at Michael in mistake for me. In the ordinary way I should not have taken much notice of those two shots.”

“I know,” agreed Carolus. “People always suppose that a shot fired attracts instant attention from everyone in hearing distance. In the country people are often un-

conscious of having heard it. Even in town it is often thought to be a lorry back-firing. I'm never surprised when shots are unnoticed."

"But this time I at once connected it in my mind with our letters. I took a torch and went out, following the foot-path which I always use to reach his cottage and which Michael himself used on the few occasions on which he went on foot. About halfway across—I will show you the place tomorrow—I found his body. He was lying face downwards, his head in the direction he was following towards his home, and his hands in his overcoat pockets."

"Both hands?"

"Yes. I scarcely realized the detail, but the police have since assured me of it. I saw that he had been shot in the back. He was dead."

Carolus did not mistake for callousness the calm of a man whose manner was probably at all times an unemotional one. On the contrary, he felt that Lord Penge was making an effort to conceal his feelings.

"So?" Carolus pressed.

"I left him there and hurried back to the house."

"It did not occur to you to think that you might be in danger yourself?"

"Frankly, no. It was a great shock to find Michael like that and it was all that I was aware of. But I think if I had realized anything I would have been pretty confident that the murderer would not be hanging about there waiting to be arrested. He would have been out on the road by then."

"Probably, yes."

"I at once telephoned the police and sent two men to remain beside the corpse until the police arrived. The two men were the footman and my chauffeur."

"Then?"

"Then, if you want to know, I gave myself a stiff whisky and soda. I was very, very shaken. But speaking of that, may I offer you a drink now?"

"Thank you. A whisky and soda."

Lord Penge rang. This time the bell was answered by an older man, evidently the butler. Lord Penge instructed him to bring whisky and a siphon.

"Yes, My Lord. Detective Inspector Scudd is waiting to see you, My Lord."

"Oh. How long has he been waiting?"

"Rather more than an hour. He was most insistent on seeing you immediately, but of course I would not allow that, My Lord. Shall I admit him?"

"Yes, do, Chilham." When the butler had gone, Lord Penge turned to Carolus. "I suppose orders are orders, but in a case of this kind I think Chilham should have had the sense to interrupt us. It may be something urgent and important."

Carolus said nothing, but moved his seat into a rather more obscure corner. He wished to observe the Detective Inspector in charge of the case.

### 3

It was clear when this officer entered that he had small patience with Lord Penge's rigorous rules. He was a tall, bald, blue-chinned man of fifty with an intelligent but rather unprepossessing expression. He was carrying a Savage 30.30 rifle.

"I came to show you this," he said. "It was found this afternoon and seems likely to be the weapon used to kill Ratchett. I have waited more than an hour to see you, sir."

"I'm sorry, Inspector."

"If you wouldn't mind, I would ask you to give your servants instructions for the future, sir. This murder, in our opinion, requires very prompt investigation. We may lose a great deal by delays. I'm sure you see my point."

"Certainly. I'll tell the staff. This is Mr Carolus Deene, Inspector. I daresay you know his name."

If the Detective Inspector had ever heard it he certainly gave no sign of it now. After a nod to Carolus so curt that it was almost rude he turned again to Lord Penge.

"Do you recognize the rifle?"

The Savage rifle had recently been in water, but Lord Penge took it from the Inspector and examined it.

"Unless I am very much mistaken," he said, "this belonged to Michael Ratchett. I gave it to him myself. I have a little shooting-lodge near Achendouroch, and my wife, Michael and I were all very fond of a few days' sport up there."

"Deer-stalking, you mean, sir? This would be a rifle used for that?"

"Yes. I have one exactly like it. We can turn up the number on it or you can phone the makers who supplied it

to me a year ago. But I'm almost sure it is Michael's. Where was it found?"

"In the larger of the two ponds. Not twenty yards from where the body was discovered."

"Extraordinary."

"Where did Mr Ratchett keep this rifle, sir? Do you know?"

"Yes. Rather casually, I'm afraid, with other sporting guns in his cottage."

"He did not mention that it was missing or anything of the sort?"

"No. I cannot remember his ever referring to it. Have you made any other discoveries?"

"We are progressing, sir. I can say no more than that. Now if you would be kind enough to give me the necessary details so that I can phone the supplier of the rifle? Ah, thank you."

"You'll forgive me, Inspector," Carolus said. "But I think you should know that I was able to drive straight in this afternoon and be shown into this room without question. I've no doubt you have security arrangements . . ."

"We certainly have. Let me tell you that you would not have entered the park this afternoon if Lord Penge had not told us you were coming and given us a description of your car and the registration number."

"I got that from Gorringer," explained Penge.

"It's impossible with a place this size," went on the Inspector, his voice betraying a little impatience with persons who dwelt in large country houses surrounded with parkland, "to be sure that no one unauthorized approaches the house. But I think it would be difficult. There is a twenty-four-hour-a-day guard on. We can't do more than that."

"It's much appreciated, I assure you," said Penge. "A whisky and soda, Inspector?"

"I don't mind," said Scudd, less ungraciously than the words suggest. "Well, it's something to have found the

weapon. I think the murderer rested it in the fork of that chestnut tree about ten yards behind the place where Ratchett was found."

"How near the footpath is that?" asked Carolus.

"Oh, not more than half a dozen yards."

"So that Ratchett would have passed as close as that?"

"Yes. We are not taking it as absolutely certain that Ratchett was shot in mistake for Lord Penge, you know."

"I see."

Carolus said no more in the presence of the Inspector, but when he had gone he asked Lord Penge several questions.

"Did you often wear the overcoat which Ratchett borrowed?"

"Never, except in the garden or park. It was a rather loud tweed I bought in Scotland, a shepherd's plaid of very pronounced pattern. But oddly enough if I had been crossing the park that night I should almost certainly have had it on. If I had occasion to go across to Michael's cottage—and that happened fairly often lately—I would nearly always go from this room by the french window. That meant that if I needed a coat it would be this one from the cloakroom here."

"That suggests that the murderer had a pretty intimate knowledge of your habits."

"It does, rather."

"Yet he presumably did not know that you and Ratchett were working together here that afternoon?"

"No. I suppose not. Now is there anything more you would like to ask me? I imagine that as your investigations proceed you will have to come to me from time to time for details which no one else can give you. But at this stage what more can I tell you?"

"Nothing, I think."

"You will stay in the house, I hope? I should like you to meet my family as a guest, you see. They do not know that I have asked you here to make a separate investigation."

"Thank you very much. I shall be delighted."

Lord Penge rang again. He had some code with the number of pressures he gave the bell, for this time a young man in a black suit entered.

"My valet will show you your room Mr Deene, and look after your things. Dinner, as you know, is at eight-thirty, but we usually forgather in the hall at about eight."

Carolus met no one on his way up the vast ornate stairway, and on reaching his room allowed the valet to enter and unpack his bags.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Wilpey, sir."

The valet, a serious young man with large brown eyes and a rather girlish face, seemed ready enough to talk.

"Been here long?"

"Three years. That means I'm almost a new arrival. Most of the staff have worked for ages for his Lordship."

"Indeed? What does the staff consist of?"

"There's Mrs Murdoe, the housekeeper. She has her own quarters. A very active lady, sir. Of Scottish origin, I believe. Then there's old Chilham, the butler. Chilham by name and Chilham by nature, I say. But he's not a bad old stick, really. He gave me the winner of the Grand National last year."

"Good. Who else?"

"There's only one footman, Piggott. Him and I don't Get On."

"Really. Why not?"

"Well, I was in the Air Force and he's ex-Navy. He rather fancies himself at boxing and that. We seem to get into arguments about nothing. And of course this business of Mr Ratchett's death has upset everyone. The police asking questions all day and that. Everyone's inclined to be nervy."

"I can imagine that. Is that the whole indoor staff?"

"There's the cook. He's supposed to be Italian. Tomasini his name is. And there are the girls—two of them, both



Germans. One's called Lotti; she's a big plump thing who has to be told not to sing. The other's Frieda. She's . . . she's . . ."

"Yes?"

Wilpey seemed to recollect himself.

"Oh, she's all right," he said hurriedly.

"Tell me, have you ever worked in a house like this before?"

"No, sir. To tell you the truth I don't think there can *be* many houses like this. With an indoor staff like ours, I mean. Who's going to afford it? Then there are two gardeners, the chauffeur and one groom. I mean, it's a lot, isn't it?"

"It certainly is."

"Chilham told me once—between you and me, sir—that his Lordship could only do it by Spending Capital. I mean, there's all the entertaining, too."

"Much?"

"Oh yes, sir. As a matter of fact d'you know what Piggott came out with this morning? 'There's one thing about having a murder in the family,' he said. 'It will stop all that bloody entertaining for a bit.' Fancy talking like that! I mean, Mr Ratchett was quite nice, really."

"So there's no one in the house but the family?"

"There's the Hon. Ronald's tutor, Mr Lockyer. Miss Hermione was going to have a friend to stay this week, but she's had to put her off. I mean, you can't ask anyone where anyone may be shot any minute, can you? Her parents wouldn't like the idea, I mean."

"Have you any theory about the murder, Wilpey?"

"Not really a theory, sir. Of course, as you can imagine, we've talked about it morning, noon and night. I'm inclined to think it's someone who's cunning and crazy at the same time. You know, someone who's got a *thing* about killing his Lordship but may otherwise be a sane person."

"That's interesting. And of course it enlarges the field, because if you're right, it could be anyone in the house."

"*In the house?* Oh no, sir. I didn't mean that. It couldn't be anyone in the house. I mean, I know them all. It couldn't possibly be. Even Piggott."

"I hope you're right."

"Besides, sir, we've got alibis. The police have gone into all that. I mean, I was pressing his Lordship's trousers at the time."

"At what time?"

"Well, it's supposed to be about seven, isn't it? That's what the police say. I mean, Frieda was talking to me all that part of the evening. And Chilham was in Mrs Murdoe's sitting-room, playing bezique. . . ."

"Did you say bezique? I thought that went out with the last century. Does anyone know the rules?"

"They do, because they were playing it. Sixpence a hundred. Mr Chilham told me. Piggott was out in the garage with Gribbley, the chauffeur. Lotti was having a nap. So you see."

"What about the family?"

"The Hon. Eustace and Miss Hermione went down to the stables together after tea. They're both horse-mad, if you ask me, and it appeared that one of the horses had gone lame that afternoon. They came in about half-past six, because I saw them, and then they were on the phone to the Vet to come up in the morning, which he did. They wanted a drink about seven, and Chilham had to leave his game to give it them, so they couldn't have been anywhere near, could they? Then Mr Ronald was with his tutor in the old nursery, and the cook was hard at work in the kitchen."

"There's one person you haven't accounted for. Where was Lady Penge?"

"Well, to be truthful, sir, I don't know, but it surely doesn't matter, does it? I mean, have you ever *seen* her Ladyship? Well, there you are. I think I've put out everything you'll want. There's a loud-speaker for the radio through in the bathroom."

"Say that again, would you?"

"Well, I mean you've got your set here. It's a radiogram and there's a pile of long-playing records in the cabinet. And when you go for your bath you can switch it through. All the rooms have got that."

"Very convenient."

"We've got the Telly, of course. So's Mrs Murdoe. Her Ladyship has one and there's one in the hall, but his Lordship's not keen. Not for the ordinary programmes, I mean. Of course, on the Commercial there's Archer and Bucks, so I don't suppose he wants to see that. Anything more you want, sir, before I go to do his Lordship? Good night, then, Mr Deene."

Wilpey went out and Carolus prepared to bath and change. Loud-speaker in the bathroom, he thought. How would Sir John Vanbrugh like that?

But it was something to keep up this place in a style which, if slightly absurd in 1858, would have been perfectly normal only half a century ago. This, Carolus reflected, would have been one of several thousand houses of similar pretensions at any time before the outbreak of the First World War. Now if it was not unique it must be almost so. It could only, as Chilham had said, be done by a reckless expenditure of capital. No income in Great Britain under present-day taxation could support this for a moment. The wages bill alone, and not including the secretary and tutor, could not be much less than a hundred pounds a week. Unless Penge was quite fantastically rich it seemed hard on the next generation to make them watch this disbursement.

There was a falsity about the situation which increased with every hour he spent in the house. A fortune based on the use of cereals as substitutes for game, meat and fish in the making of spreading pastes was being dissipated on the upkeep of an establishment which would have been an anachronism for the last twenty-five years and more. The son of a small grocer who had made himself a millionaire peer was restoring and maintaining a house of real beauty;

and doing so without an error. A deer-stalking secretary had been shot with his own rifle, presumably by a man who had amused himself in sending threats to the secretary's employer. There were loud-speakers in the bathrooms of a Vanbrugh house. It was all too contradictory to take seriously. Yet a man had been killed, and though the killer presumably had made a mistake in identity, his intention to murder was obvious enough.

At eight o'clock Carolus went downstairs, and found Lord Penge already in the hall looking into a fire of immense logs which gave cheer to the whole large room. A set of magnificent cut-glass chandeliers lighted it, but it succeeded in having a sort of cosiness in spite of its size.

The first arrival was Lady Penge. She was short and of a shape seen usually among the better-fed classes in Latin countries, her back as straight as a board in spite of its width and upholstery, her front straight too from the ground to the top of her bosom, where it suddenly curved inwards to form a sort of shelf under her chin. It was as though a Dior dress had been fitted on a water-butt out of which a rather jolly face and two fleshy arms were poked. But in spite of this she moved lightly and quickly. She spoke somewhat stertorously, but there was the suggestion of a chuckle in her voice.

She made the conventional enquiries of a hostess, and Carolus replied conventionally. Then she said unexpectedly, "I know who you are. Gorringer's friend." A fat little hand touched Carolus's arm, and he could feel Lady Penge shaking with laughter. "Gorringer!" she spluttered, and almost doubled up with mirth.

"He is rather a headmaster," admitted Carolus.

"I adore him. He calls me 'dear lady' and talks to Arthur about his 'responsibilities'." She was interrupted by the entrance of a slim, freckled girl, rather fey-looking, but pretty in a dryad sort of way. "This is my daughter, Mr Deene."

Hermione smiled.

"We're not supposed to know you're investigating, but of course we all do. Any clues?"

"Lots. There always are."

They were joined by a handsome, open-air-looking young man, not too intelligent-looking, but naturally amiable, probably popular and certainly what used to be called 'a good sport'.

"My brother Eustace. This is Carolus Deene. Oh, and here's Ronald. You're met us all now."

Ronald was about seventeen, thin and rather petulant in expression. He looked as though he had suffered from a good deal of ill-health. His eyes were pale blue and seemed weak, peering narrowly from behind spectacles.

"Yes. I must have," agreed Carolus.

A prematurely bald, bull-necked, sandy-haired man of twenty-six came across with the stumping walk of the muscle-bound.

"Mr Lockyer. Mr Deene. That is the *last*. We call him Lucky Lockyer, though God knows he's not, poor devil, having to tutor Ron."

"Oh. Any other nicknames?"

"Mummy's always been Annie Oakley."

There was one of those sudden ugly silences which give to a remark just made a disproportionate significance.

"Why?" went on Hermione gaily. "Oh, didn't you know? She was supposed to be the finest markswoman of her time. Even now she's incredible. She could shoot an apple off a man's head at fifty yards, I believe. If she had to, I mean. What on earth's the matter with you all? Have I said something?"

## 4

CAROLUS DECIDED that it was from that moment of a seeming *gaffe* and general consternation that the whole case changed and became a far uglier thing. It had started by being some nonsense of Gorringer's, then turned to fantasy as Carolus saw the monstrous estate which Lord Penge kept up, the beautiful, unreal house and gardens and the affectation of a Victorian or Edwardian way of life. Then, in meeting some of the people who lived and worked here, he had found it hard to remember that only two days ago a man had been murdered in the park, a man who had doubtless been an accepted member of this small community, a friend to the family not, Carolus felt, resented by the staff. All seemed kind, rather commonplace people: the chatty valet, the peer himself, his butt-like wife, the sporty elder children, the sicklier younger son and the muscular tutor. Pleasant, unextraordinary people they had seemed, and in spite of the surroundings Carolus could have felt at home among them.

That suddenly changed. The remark itself was nothing, but from the moment it was made Carolus sensed a difference in the atmosphere. It grew gradually, it came from many minute causes, but it was clearly perceptible. These people feared something, and it was not, he believed, the writer of the mad letters of warning and menace. It was among themselves. It was in the house, in their daily life and relationships.

It was as though there was a secret among them, or perhaps a conspiracy—something they shared and were desperately anxious to conceal from others. The children feared their father, Carolus thought, and adored their

mother. The servants were almost too well trained. The establishment was too smoothly run. Under that urbanity there must be jealous intrigues. What Carolus began to realize that first evening was that however normal and nice everyone might seem, there was among them a common cause, and it was sinister and ugly. It might be fear, it might be hatred, it might be fierce jealousy, it might be madness.

Yet it did not seem certain that it was the result, direct or indirect, of the murder of Michael Ratchett. Their attitude to this was most odd. Lord Penge had spoken of it with a calm that must surely have been a mask for deep emotion; the others had not spoken of it at all. Even the valet had referred cheerfully to 'this business of Mr Ratchett's death', and Lady Penge had laughed immoderately at the recollection of Mr Gorringer, but did not seem interested in the reason for Carolus's presence.

Yet only two nights ago Ratchett had been with them here in the hall waiting to go through to the dining-room, chatting and listening, presumably, a member of the family. He had been shot in the back a hundred or two yards from here, and there had been police enquiries and heavy headlines in national newspapers and there was to be an inquest and probably an arrest. Yet here they were, behaving as though nothing in the world had happened.

Carolus found himself beside Hermione.

"Tell me," he said, "what sort of man was your father's secretary?"

She looked at him quickly.

"Why do you ask?"

"I'm curious. You see, if I may say something frank, I can't help feeling he was either a complete nonentity or rather unpopular among you. Nobody seems to remember him."

Hermione smiled.

"Don't be deceived. The edict has gone out from Father that the tragedy is not to be mentioned. Father says he has

quite enough of it from the police without hearing his family talking about it. I don't think Michael was unpopular and he wasn't really a nonentity."

"Yet . . ."

"Well, he was rather a remote sort of person. I don't think anyone but Father really knew him. He didn't talk much, but if he said anything it was to the point. He was one of those people who were very rarely wrong about things, yet he didn't parade his knowledge. You only had to ask him how old were the Pyramids or what was *dimorpotheca* or how to treat a dog that had eaten rat-poison. He always seemed to know."

"What age?"

"Younger than Father. In his forties, I should think. He had about the same build as Father, though. He wore glasses most of the time, and Father, as you know, has wonderful eyesight and doesn't even use them for reading. Apart from that at a distance you could mistake one for the other."

Someone did, thought Carolus, but he made no direct reference to the murder.

They went into dinner, and it was just the sort of meal that might be expected in that house. Small china plaques stood beside each place at the vast table and on each of these was inscribed the rather intimidating menu. *Potage à la Parmentier, Filets de Sole à la Crème, Gigot d'Agneau braisé, Poularde rôtie. Salade, Pommes Meringuées, Crème d'Ananas. Légumes: Haricot Vert naturel, Pommes Nouvelles.* Carolus did not recognize every wine, but there was a fine sherry with the soup, a light claret with the Gigot, a glorious burgundy—he thought a Chambertin—with the chicken, and a champagne with the sweet.

Lady Penge and her daughter left them and Chilham set the port decanter beside Lord Penge. Now, Carolus thought, they must discuss the thing that was on their minds. Yet there were some minutes of general conversation before Lord Penge said to his eldest son, "The police have found



the weapon, Eustace. Or what seems certain to have been it. It was that Savage 30-30 I gave Michael two years ago."

"Good heavens! How can the . . . murderer have got hold of that?"

"Not very difficult, I should think," said Lockyer. "Michael was awfully careless about his guns. Besides, he used to leave his cottage open at all times."

"Odd, wasn't it?" said Eustace. "Did you know he was in Field Security during war? One would have thought he had keys for everything."

"I suppose he never mentioned to any of you that the rifle was missing?"

"I scarcely spoke to him at all on Wednesday," said Eustace. "Except when I drove him up from the village."

"I did. I saw him."

Ronald's voice was curiously high-pitched and strained. He looked straight at Carolus as he spoke.

"I saw him that afternoon."

"Really? At what time?" asked Carolus. Was there an uneasy movement among those present, a flutter of apprehension lest Ronald should say anything indiscreet? No one spoke.

"It must have been about . . . five o'clock," said Ronald in a flat, hopeless voice. "He was coming into the house."

"Yes. I had just dropped him," said Eustace.

Carolus spoke rather shakily to Ronald.

"Was he wearing an overcoat?"

Ronald seemed bewildered and looked about him as if for help. One might have thought that he had prepared answers for most questions but none for this.

"An overcoat? I don't know. I didn't notice. He would have had, wouldn't he? It was chilly. Yes, I expect he had an overcoat on."

"But you don't remember it?"

"No. I didn't notice. He might have."

Lord Penge sent the port in rotation for the second time.

"I think I can clear that little problem up for you if it is

of any importance. But first I had better explain to my sons and to Lockyer that you are investigating in this case and that they can answer your questions quite freely. Yes Michael must have worn an overcoat that afternoon because it is still in the hall cloakroom. You will remember that I told you how he borrowed my old one because it was there in the library and he was going straight across from there by the french windows. But he could have gone for his own coat and it would probably have saved his life."

Ronald said: "Oh God!"

"I wonder if you can be sure of that?" said Carolus to Lord Penge. "Surely that coat might have been left there another time, the weather being as changeable as it is?"

Lord Penge considered.

"Possibly," he said. "But I've the impression that something was said to suggest to me that it was not the case. Perhaps Michael said, 'I won't wait to fetch my coat, but borrow yours', or something. I don't remember him doing so, but I seem to have some reason for thinking that he had brought his own coat to the house that day. What do you think, Eustace? You drove him up."

"I've been trying to remember. I just don't know."

"There's another thing," said Carolus. "When he left you to run over to his cottage was he wearing his glasses?"

"Ah, that I can answer quite unequivocally. He was not. They are lying on my table at this moment. He had bi-focal lenses. The lower part was strong for reading, the upper part almost natural. He was supposed to use them for reading only, but frequently kept them on all day by force of habit. That afternoon we had been studying small type and his eyes were tired. He took his glasses off a few minutes before leaving and did not put them on when he went out."

"Would *they* have saved his life?" asked Ronald excitedly.

"Quite possibly," said Lord Penge, "though I should have thought it was too dark that evening for the murderers to distinguish them."

Ronald turned to Carolus.

"Do you know who it was?"

"No. I have no opinion yet."

"Do you think he will try again to kill my father?"

"I think that until he has been identified Lord Penge should be very cautious."

"But Father is cautious, aren't you, Father?" said Eustace. "The place is stiff with plain-clothes men."

"Yes. I'm as cautious as I can be, but it's impossible to be a hundred per cent secure. The only hope is to discover as quickly as possible who wants to kill me. That is what Mr Deene is going to do."

Lockyer looked at Carolus in a way that suggested hostility.

"That's what the police are doing, surely," he said.

"Oh yes. But the police were a long while before they took the matter seriously."

"Wasn't Mr Deene?"

Lord Penge smiled.

"We can scarcely blame him," he said. "He heard of it through my old friend Gorringer, a very worthy fellow, but not a man one would take too seriously outside his own province."

Lockyer looked somewhat sulky and refilled his glass.

"I suppose it's quite irrelevant," said Carolus, "but I can't help being curious about Ratchett. He seems to have left so small a gap in the world. Had he no parents?"

"None alive," said Lord Penge. "His father was the Buenos Aires agent for a number of British manufacturers, among whom, in a small way, then, was our firm. When I went to Argentina as a young man I went to his home. Michael was such a small boy at that time that he had been packed off to bed before I arrived. I don't think I ever saw him in Buenos Aires, but when he first came to me in England he reminded me of his parents."

"But had he no relations at all?"

"I believe there were some cousins somewhere, but I don't think he had anything to do with them. I believe we

were his only friends. As for leaving a gap, he has left one here, I assure you. He was not only a good friend but a magnificent secretary, and he has been a sort of uncle to my sons."

"Rather," said Eustace. "But I see what Mr Deene means. He wasn't the kind of person one noticed particularly. He was just there and now he's not there."

"Don't talk like that!" said Ronald. "It's a terrible thing. I shall never get over it!"

"Was he a particular friend of yours?" Carolus asked the boy.

"No. No. It's not that. It's just . . . it's terrible."

"It might have been your father," Lockyer pointed out.

"It may yet be," said Ronald.

Lord Penge looked about him. Carolus could scarcely believe it when he heard him say quietly, without a suggestion of inverted commas round the question, "Shall we join the ladies?"

It was another hour before Carolus could politely go up to bed, and this he found rather trying, because he wanted to be alone and think. No further reference was made to Ratchett and the conversation was not very entertaining. Lady Penge was playing Patience and there were several small dogs around her. The drawing-room was too warm and everyone had eaten a little too much. Not an animated atmosphere.

Carolus found his bedroom almost as over-heated as the rooms downstairs and at once turned off the radiator and opened a window. The bed was a handsome Dutch one and superbly comfortable, but it was a long time before he could sleep. He found himself remembering the anxious face of Ronald when he had been addressed, and wondering whether he had been right in sensing a certain disquiet among them all whenever Ronald was about to speak. The almost majestic detachment of Lord Penge was no less puzzling. He appeared outwardly to feel little for his dead friend and secretary and showed no signs of apprehension

on his own behalf. But then he showed no signs of any emotions, so far as Carolus had seen. He was a man of quite extraordinary calm.

Carolus slept at last, but was wakened to instant attention. He had the sensation of having been roused from sleep by some noise or touch or movement which he could not recall; he knew that he had not woken naturally. There was moonlight in the room, not bright enough to show him his watch-face but too bright to let him see the luminous figures on it. He looked at it under the bed-clothes and found that the time was only two-fifteen. He lay listening attentively.

Presently he heard a sound from under his window. His room was in the front of the house, and the window looked out on a gravel area behind which lawns ran back to the grassland of the park. Someone was on the gravel.

Carolus moved cautiously to the window. He was glad that before sleeping he had opened it and drawn back the curtains. Slowly he bent forward till he could see the area beneath and the figure of a man there. At first he thought it was one of the plain-clothes men who, he knew, were stationed in and round the house. Then he saw a white shirt-front, and knew that it was Lord Penge.

This did not look very like the caution of which the man boasted. He was peering about him as though waiting for someone, and in a moment Lockyer, Ronald's tutor, appeared running from the back of the house.

"He's not . . ." he began breathlessly.

"No. He's out in the park. I saw him just now. In the direction of the ponds."

Without a word Lockyer sprinted away. Carolus had the impression that it was not the first occasion on which these two had faced this or a similar crisis. Lord Penge seemed content to wait.

Carolus moved cautiously back to pull on a dressing-gown. The night was not unpleasantly cold, but there was a light mist rising. The moon was in now and he could see

very little, but he was aware that Penge was still at his post beneath him.

It must have been ten minutes before Lockyer returned, and when he did so he was leading Ronald by the arm. The moon came out again for a moment as they approached and Carolus saw that the boy was wearing nothing but pyjamas. He half-expected recriminations from Penge, but heard him address his son kindly, in a low voice.

"Go to bed, my boy You'll get pneumonia. Lockyer, would you please see he has a hot drink and a hot-water bottle?"

"Father . . ."

"It's all right, my boy Everything's all right No one is angry with you Good night "

Carolus anticipated that, before leaving, Penge would glance upward to see if there were any lights on or any sign that he had been observed He moved backward and stood completely concealed by the curtain Then he heard Penge's steady, unhurried footsteps on the gravel and no more.

## 5

BEFORE HE reached the dining-room next morning Carolus guessed what breakfast would be like at Highcastle Manor. He was embarrassingly right. At the vast sideboard stood Chilham dealing with a series of dishes over burners, but even that expanse of mahogany was not large enough for all the food to be exhibited and a side-table stood beside it. Carolus saw a large York ham, a fine tongue, a brawn and a galantine, while under the covers of Chilham's dishes were mushrooms, kidneys, bacon, kedgeree, smoked haddock, scrambled eggs, kippers, grilled cutlets and sausages.

Reeling a little, Carolus was about to make his way to the table for his customary toast and butter when Chilham, evidently misreading his motive in not pausing at the sideboard, came forward

"Would you like an omelette, sir?" he asked gravely. "Or there's some nice game-pie"

Carolus declined and joined Hermione and Eustace at the table. They were enjoying smoked trout as a small part of their simple breakfast. Carolus wondered how this family fared during rationing.

Lord Penge joined them, and after eating a few peaches accepted a plate of porridge and cream.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked Carolus, and Carolus wondered whether there was not a suggestion of anxiety in the question.

"Not very, I'm afraid," said Carolus. "My room was most comfortable, but I never manage to sleep well in strange surroundings. Small noises seem unnaturally loud, and I lie awake listening for a long time. Rather childish, I'm afraid."

"Not at all," said Lord Penge. "I have the same habit."

After breakfast Eustace spoke seriously to Carolus alone.

"Do you really think the police know what they're doing?" he asked. "It seems to me pretty foolhardy of Father to stay here when we know another attempt will be made on his life. And it won't be a mistake this time."

"I should think your father's as safe here as anywhere," said Carolus. "If he has got a madman after him, merely going somewhere else isn't going to help much. The only real safety for everyone lies in finding out who shot Ratchett."

"But what are these security arrangements the police have made? Are they really adequate? It seems to me that almost anyone could get into the place."

"It's the sort of thing the police are usually pretty good at," said Carolus. "I don't think you need worry."

"Mr Deene, as a personal favour to the family will you test the police defences in some way? It would be a great relief to us if they were found to be better than we think."

Carolus thought of Detective Inspector Scudd's sharp retort of yesterday. He had not been piqued by it, but it did seem to him that the policeman was a little over-confident.

"I might try," said Carolus. "But not immediately. I've got some enquiries to make which are most urgent."

"Oh. Whom do you want to question?"

"Mrs Carker," said Carolus at once. "She acted as housekeeper to Ratchett, I believe, and her cottage is a few yards from his. If she is at all an observant person her evidence will be most valuable."

"She's observant, all right, but of course I can't see what Michael's life has to do with it. However, you know. . . ."

"Someone took that rifle from the cottage," said Carolus.

"Yes. There's that. D'you want your car brought round? I'll tell Gribbley."

"Thanks."

Carolus went out to the front door, as he wished to meet the chauffeur when he came. He found Gribbley a tubby,



cheerful, red-faced man in his early fifties, willing, if not anxious, to chatter. He addressed Carolus by name.

"Yes, Mr Deene, Piggott told me who you were and what you are here for. I'm sure I wish you luck. I'd like to see the beggar caught and hanged."

"Of course, you knew Piggott before."

"In the *Andrew*, sir."

"Yes. You got him his job here, I believe?"

"No, as a matter of fact he got me mine. He came out some time before I did because I was finishing my twenty-one. I was a PO, you see, sir, and it made it worth it for the pension. Piggott got this job here, and just when I was coming out the last chauffeur got religious mania and thought his lordship's Rolls was an avenging chariot and drove it across the park at Mrs Spotter saying she was the whore of Babylon. So I got the job."

"I'd like to ask you a few questions, some time, Gribbley."

"Certainly, sir. Come round to the garage when you want. Piggott might be able to tell you something too."

Driving away, Carolus thought how pleasant, to all appearances, these people were. What a kind, friendly, hospitable, happy household it was—to all appearances. Why, to all appearances there was not one of them who would so much as say an unkind word of another, let alone do a brutal or even a thoughtless thing. Jolly ex-naval men, nice ex-RAF man, faithful old butler, cheerful and warm-hearted mother, devoted children—one could not ask for more, to all appearances. Yet there had been that sudden flight from the house by its youngest member and the business-like pursuit of him by his muscular tutor. That had yet to be explained before these sweet appearances could quite be accepted.

He found Mrs Carker waiting for him, a neat little woman in a gingerbread house of a lodge with a spotless apron and smooth silver hair. She was expecting him and volubly told him so. Within a few minutes Carolus realized that she must spend most of her waking hours in auto-

locution laced with as heavy a measure of clichés as the words would carry.

‘Yes,’ Eustace telephoned to tell me you were coming and I said to myself, ‘I wonder whatever he’ll want to know,’ it isn’t as though I ever went spying into anyone’s affairs, because what with one thing and another I’ve got enough worries of my own. Still, if there’s anything I can tell you I’m sure I’d only be too willing if it’ll help to find out who killed Mr Ratchett. I said to myself when I heard about it, ‘Well, that’s a nice thing, a gentleman being shot in the back and no one knowing who did it.’ Would you like to come in, sir, or do you want to go to Mr Ratchett’s cottage that was?”

“Perhaps that would be best.”

Mrs Carker pulled on a woollen shawl and looked perfectly in character. How nice and right and old England and picture-book they all appeared. It might be the world of Kate Greenaway or Walter Crane

“It’s just as he left it. The police have never so much as asked me anything about it, but they may know what they’re about. We’re not to know, are we? I said to myself, ‘Well,’ I said, ‘I suppose I shall have detectives along now wanting to know this, that and the other, and there’s enough to do without that.’ But they’ve never put foot in the place, so you don’t know what to think, do you?”

They entered the little brick-floored sitting-room and Mrs Carker crossed to open a window, for the room was both stuffy and musty. In the corner, leaning against the wall, were two sporting guns. Carolus eyed these.

“You’re looking at his guns,” said Mrs Carker; “and well you might, because it’s my belief, and no one will ever make me think different, that the murderer stole Mr Ratchett’s gun from there not a quarter of an hour before he shot him.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Because Mr Ratchett never thought to lock the cottage before he went out, and that evening someone came in to

get something and went out again, or may I never move from here."

"What time was that?"

"Must have been well after seven. I saw the light come on in this room from where I was in my kitchen, though of course I couldn't see who it was. 'Oh,' I thought to myself, 'that's Mr Ratchett popped in to get something,' but from all accounts it wasn't, because from what I can hear he'd only just left his Lordship when he was shot. So there you are. It couldn't only have been one thing whichever way you look at it. It was the murderer come for the rifle and, what's more, he must have known where to lay hands on it, and how to get it, because he wasn't in the place not more than a few minutes, and I heard the door slam after him. 'There,' I said to myself, 'Mr Ratchett is in a hurry'; and I only wish I'd have been right, because when all's said and done he might be alive and well to this day if it had of been him. You never know, do you? But if anyone was to have told me that the light I saw was the murderer coming for the weapon I shouldn't have known whether I was standing on my head or my heels. It's lucky I thought it was Mr Ratchett."

"Did he have many visitors?"

"Well, not to say visitors, but of course there was often someone across from the Manor, and his Lordship seemed to like looking in for a chat sometimes in the early part of the evening when he'd walked across. Then more than once Mr Piggott came in about something. He and Mr Ratchett were very thick. Oh, very thick they were. I often said to myself, 'I wonder whatever a gentleman like Mr Ratchett sees in that Piggott', I said. But there you are. We can't all think alike, can we? We're as we're made and there's nothing to be done about it."

"Anyone else?"

"There was the gentleman who was staying at the Duke of Suffolk. Well, I say gentleman, but we're not to know, are we? I said to myself when I saw him come. I said. 'I

wonder who this is with his big check overcoat and his red face,' because I'd never set eyes on him before. You know what it is; you *do* wonder about anything like that."

"When was this visit?"

"On the Monday at about five o'clock. He was there half an hour, I should think, all told."

"How did you know who he was?"

"It was my husband told me when he came home, and we could see the gentleman when he left. 'Who in the world's that?' I asked, because I thought it might be someone coming to work for his Lordship. Well, I wasn't to know any different, was I? But my husband knew. 'Staying at the Duke of Suffolk,' he said; 'likes a game of darts in the public. Name of Trumper.' 'Oh,' I said. That's about all in the way of visitors. But Mr Ratchett wasn't one to want a lot of people morning, noon and night. What I mean to say, he hadn't a lot to say for himself and didn't like people who couldn't keep quiet for five minutes at a time. But there you are. We can't all be the same, can we? That would never do."

"When was the last time Lord Penge came to the cottage?"

"Oh, not for some days before the murder. In fact I said to myself, 'His Lordship hasn't been across for a day or two,' I said. 'The last time he was here was the Sunday before, and Mr Ratchett was away for the day.' I remember because it was cold that day and his Lordship never took his coat off. He had a great big coat right down to his heels, and I said to myself, 'There. I wonder if he's warm enough with *that*,' I said. I popped across to see if he wanted anything, but he said, 'No, thank you, Mrs Carker; I've just come to consult some files,' he said. He had a lot of papers on the table. I left him here. I said to myself, 'Well, he can get on with it,' I said, 'I've got the supper to get.' I didn't hear him go, though. Must have gone out the back way, I suppose, because I don't miss much. Unless it was after my husband turned the wireless on for the nine o'clock

news. We don't have the television. I don't like anything like that; it tires you out looking at it."

"I don't very much."

"Some of them's got it," said Mrs Carker, a hint of bitterness in her voice; "those Spotters (he's the groom up at the Manor) sit looking at it till I don't know what time, and without a word of a lie the children can scarcely drag themselves to school in the morning, poor mites, from straining their eyes. But my husband says he wouldn't have one as a gift, not whatever anyone says about the latest thing. We like the old-fashioned wireless. So there you are. It takes all sorts to make a world, I suppose, and you can't have it both ways."

"Did Lord Penge often consult papers here?"

"Well, from what I could make out they were doing a book together and parts of it were here and parts over at the Manor. All I can say is, when I told Mr Ratchett next day his Lordship had been here with the files, as he called them, he didn't seem surprised, so I suppose it was the ordinary thing. I couldn't see everything that went on, nor wanted to, for that matter. We've all got our own affairs to attend to, whether we like it or not. If it's not one thing, it's another, and there's really scarcely time to turn round before there's another day gone and you haven't done half you wanted to, and have got no one to blame but yourself. Do you find it a bit chilly in here, sir?"

"No. And you shouldn't with that beautiful shawl."

"Poor Mr Ratchett gave me that. It came over with his mother's things when she died in a place he used to call Bee A, wherever that is. I said to myself, 'I've heard of Bees, but never known a place named after one.' But it's the finest wool I've ever seen, so light and yet warm; you're thankful for it in all sorts of weathers."

"When did Mr Ratchett lose his mother?"

"Must have been about a year ago she passed on. And you ought to have seen the rubbish they sent home from this Bee A, all packed in old trunks and baskets. There was

thousands of papers that had to be gone through and most of them burnt, and all the clothes had been sent as if someone had just packed everything there was. It was enough to give anyone the creeps. You've never seen anything like it in all your life. We'd none of us wish to think anyone would see everything we'd got when Anything Happened to us, would we? It isn't as though we know when it's coming, is it?"

"Mr Ratchett spent some time with these papers?"

"He was at them for a long time. Couldn't put them down. I said to myself, 'I wish he'd put those old papers down and eat his supper like anyone else. You can't neglect your meals or else where are you? Right's right, and no one should go poking about with papers while his tea gets cold.' But there are none of those papers left here, so far as I know. What wasn't burnt Mr Ratchett must have taken away with him, because you can look high and low . . ."

"Thank you. I should like to have a look round."

"I'll leave you to it, then. I've got my husband's dinner to cook, and that won't do itself. That's where it comes in. We've been married all these years, and I've never been a minute late with his dinner except once when the last chauffeur went off his head, poor fellow, and came to my back door without a stitch on, talking about the ravens bringing him food. I said to myself, 'It would be better if they brought him at least a pair of pants to pull on.' But what can you do? You can't go against nature, and who are we to say? You might as well have tried to fly as to get him to behave himself after that—his mind was quite gone, and if they hadn't have locked him up he'd have done someone an injury. He was talking about vengeance then, and that's always a bad sign. Well, this won't do. Standing here talking while there's work to be done. You're going to stay here, sir. That's right. If you wouldn't mind just turning the key in the lock when you've finished and handing it in to me I'd be ever so obliged. Yes, that chauffeur—Worsdyke was his name—was a sad case, especially when he

told his Lordship that God was going to strike him with a thunderbolt and I don't know what not. It *was* a turn-out for a day or two till they came and took him off to a Home somewhere. Well, I must be getting along. I haven't started peeling my potatoes yet, and it's past eleven. Of course I don't believe his Lordship and Mr Ratchett were quite that friendly. Not as much as everyone used to say. I don't say they weren't together a lot, but it's not the same thing. Nor her Ladyship either. I mean with his Lordship. I don't say they didn't talk when other people were there, but it's my belief it was another thing when they were on their own. From all accounts she's come out with a few home truths more than once before now. But then people will say anything. Well, I can't stay here all day, sir, else I shall never get anything done. I'll pop over to my house and see about the dinner. It won't take long, because it's all ready except the potatoes and that. I said to myself before I came out this morning, 'There,' I said, 'that won't take long to get ready.' I'll see you when you've finished, then sir. There's nothing locked anywhere."

Suddenly, as though it could only be done by a violent effort of will and the speed of a bolting rabbit, Mrs Carker was out of the room and Carolus heard the squeak of the iron gate as she hurried from the garden.

But he was not very long in the house. As Mrs Carker had said, nothing was locked, and it seemed that the reason why, so far as papers or intimate possessions were concerned, was that there was nothing here of the smallest significance or interest. This little house represented a bachelor quarters of a man of some means—his clothes and other personal possessions argued that; of sporting tastes the guns and rods were evidence; of reference-book mentality, as shown by the contents of the bookshelves, but of no particular eccentricity to be gathered from the home he had left with every intention of returning to it in a few hours time.

The fact that there was nothing here indicative of

informative in the matter Carolus was investigating was not, he felt, the result of a sudden impulse of secrecy. Ratchett had not 'said to himself', as Mrs Carker might have done, that you never know, queer things happen, better be careful than sorry, and concealed all that he felt was incriminating, indiscreet or merely personal. It had been a deliberate and long-standing policy. Whether he feared the inquisitiveness of Mrs Carker or of someone else it was impossible to guess, but one thing was certain, while he had left his guns for anyone to steal, he had destroyed or concealed elsewhere every paper which could reveal what kind of man he was, what were his troubles, secrets, sins or intrigues, what kind acts or evil things he did, what were his ambitions and shames. In a word, there was nothing to learn here, and Carolus soon departed.



## 6

'THE GENTLEMAN who was staying at the Duke of Suffolk,' Mrs Carker had said; 'big check overcoat and red face.' The words had remained in Carolus's mind and he decided to see whether this visitor to the murdered man was still in the village. He admitted to himself that as yet he was floundering, trying out ideas, indulging in guesswork, prospecting, and had no sensible or coherent line of enquiry ahead of him. The fact that the first of the warning letters had been posted in London and the last in Highcastle suggested that a visitor may have come to the district whose connection with the case might well be established.

Carolus parked his Bentley in an empty area beside the Duke of Suffolk, a pub nearly as artfully restored as Highcastle Manor. He went into the saloon bar and ordered himself a whisky from a young woman wearing too much jewellery.

He knew this kind of pub: hidden lighting, miniature bottles, strings of coloured bulbs around the bar, a newly-bricked open fireplace with an artificial electric fire in it, beer-barrels cunningly carpentered and varnished to make tables and thick linoleum in a design of old tiles. It was no more forbidding than other forms of pub decoration, the olde world, the chromium and neon light, the ship's cabin or the yellow oak.

The only other customer was almost certainly his man. A check overcoat hung across the chair beside him and he had the red face noticed by Mrs Carker; an unpleasant face, too, Carolus decided. A moment later any doubt of his identity was removed by the barmaid, who put down the *Daily Mirror* to say, "Going out today, Mr Tramper?"

In a thick, ginny voice Trampler said, "Yes. I've got business to do."

"Mmmm," chanted the barmaid absently on two notes. She had that infuriating habit, not uncommon among barmaids, of keeping her eyes fixed on vacancy over the customers' heads and speaking as though she had been unwillingly recalled from beautiful distances.

"Can't spend all day here," went on Trampler.

"No. We close at two"

Trampler laughed. He looked very much at home in this setting, his overcoat pulled and straining as he leant his bulk against the bar and his rather piggy eyes on the barmaid's contours. Carolus knew his type, a small confidence trickster, petty swindler, undischarged bankrupt, probably, ready to steal from anyone who employed him, ready to swindle or blackmail. It was pretty certain that Trampler had done short terms of imprisonment and likely that he would do more.

"What are you on now? Still the advertisement space?"

"That's it. Keeps me busy."

"I can't understand anyone taken in by it."

"What d'you mean, 'taken in'? It's legitimate business. All right and proper."

"Still, what do they get for their money?" the barmaid asked, apparently of the picture-rail on the opposite wall.

"They do all right. Give me another gin-and-pep, will you?"

Carolus could see several lines of approach which might be highly successful. He could cross to Trampler and say in a low voice, "Remember me? Brixton Prison." Or he could go up, show his membership card of some club as though it were a CID carnet, and say, "Your name's Trampler, I think. I should like a word with you." In the end he decided on one even more startling. He waited till another customer entered, then, while the barmaid was serving, stood directly in front of the man,

"What reason had you for calling on Mr Ratchett?"

asked, then watched the effect. There was an almost physical start, a quick look at Carolus, a look down, one towards the barmaid as though for help, a twitch and eventually the expected reply.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Carolus sighed.

"Oh, that routine," he said wearily. "At five o'clock on Monday March the thirtieth you called at the cottage occupied by Mr Ratchett, Lord Penge's secretary, and remained with him half an hour. What did you have to discuss?"

"Who are you?" asked Trampler uneasily.

"Just an inquisitive individual who knows of your visit to a man murdered two days later. What did you go and see him about?"

"I didn't. I've never seen him."

"Then you just walked into his empty cottage and spent half an hour there. You broke in, in fact. Why?"

"Nothing of the sort. I can't remember every place I call at."

Carolus sighed.

"Oh, all right," he said. "You're under no obligation to answer me. I should have thought you would have seen that it was in your interest to do so."

"What makes you think I called on Ratchett?"

"Let's forget it," said Carolus, turning away. He knew his man was on the hook.

"If I did call on anyone it would have been on business."

"What business?"

"I'm an advertisement salesman. Programmes, local leaflets . . ."

"That old racket? Do you still find mugs for that? But what possible interest could it have had for Mr Ratchett?"

"His boy . . ."

"You aren't seriously asking me to believe that you were trying to sell advertisement space for the products of Archer and Buck to Lord Penge here at his private house and through his private secretary?"

"You never know," said Tramper, a little of his confidence returning.

"So you prefer not to tell me the reason for that call?"

"I've told you. Business."

"Pity," said Carolus, and paid for his whisky.

"If it was anything else I'd tell you," said Tramper.

Carolus moved towards the door.

"You're not supposing I had anything to do with the murder, are you?"

"Good day," said Carolus.

"Just a minute . . ."

Carolus left the bar.

In the hall was a tall man of rather exaggeratedly military appearance who stopped him.

"Excuse me, I understand that you're staying up at the Manor. Could you spare me a moment?"

They went into a comfortable office.

"I noticed you talking to that fellow. May I enquire if he is an acquaintance of yours?"

"I know something of him."

"Very awkward. I don't wish to presume on you, but I'd be most grateful if you could tell me anything you know about him."

"He's a liar," said Carolus. "He's working a sort of confidence trick which is just within the law."

The landlord or manager looked worried.

"I'm Major Stour," he said. "I own this place. Just taken it over, as a matter of fact. I don't want any trouble here. This man Tramper came ten days ago and said he intended to stay for a couple of months. He hasn't paid anything yet. The usual story—money arriving this week, and so on. I'm not so much worried about what he owes, but I don't want all the business of seizing his bags and informing the police, and he shows no sign of leaving."

"I think he's afraid to leave," said Carolus. "He called on Ratchett, Lord Penge's secretary, two days before he was murdered. Whether Tramper had anything to do with the

murder or not, to move away so suddenly might involve him."

"Good heavens! I didn't know that."

"Tell me, has he a typewriter?"

"Yes. But it's not of much value. An out-of-date Hemington Portable."

"I see. He has a car?"

"No. Gracious no. I say, you don't think the fellow is mixed up in that murder, do you?"

"I'm very much at sea at present. I may be able to tell you more later."

"Thanks. I don't know what to do. It's not pleasant having the fellow in the house."

Carolus left him looking gloomy and hurried back to Highcastle Manor. He felt he would not be popular if he was late for lunch.

When he had survived the four or five courses of this he contrived to get Lord Penge to himself for a moment.

"Did Ratchett say anything to you about a man named Trampler?"

"Trampler? No. I don't recall the name at all."

"He has been staying at the Duke of Suffolk for about ten days."

"No. I've heard nothing of him."

"Did Ratchett mention receiving an unexpected visit?"

"He said something one day about a man coming to see him with a new line in obtaining money. I get a great many beggars, Deene, and not all through the post either. I often think it is one of the hypocrisies of the English that they feel superiority when they go abroad and see street-beggars. Is it worse to ask a man to his face for the price of a loaf of bread than to pester him by post, telephone and appointments made under false pretences? And not for the price of a loaf by any means. I have been asked for the expenses of a holiday in Bermuda, a pension for life, several repurchases of mortgages and the cost of educating countless children at expensive schools. I allot so much a year for

charity and my firm's accountant deals with appeals in consultation with my wife."

"So this was a new form of begging?"

"No. Not begging by any means. A man came to Michael and informed him that his wife had died of ptomaine poisoning after eating one of our products. He could, he said, produce medical evidence in support of this. He had come to Michael because he thought I might like to settle the matter privately rather than through solicitors. It would cost me less this way, he said. Michael assured me that the fellow seriously thought we should pay him several thousand pounds."

"He didn't tell you his name or anything about him?"

"Nothing at all. It was just the incident he recounted. He didn't even say where he had seen the man."

"It sounds very like this Trampler. On the other hand, Trampler arrived here on the day before the threatening letter was posted in Highcastle. Moreover, though this may be the most commonplace coincidence, he owns an old Hemington Portable typewriter"

"Indeed? And he is staying at the Duke of Suffolk. Ought we to inform the police of that?"

"Perhaps it would be as well. They'll become aware of him soon in any case, because he looks like bilking the hotel."

"Do you think it possible that he murdered Ratchett?"

"Possible, yes. I wouldn't put it more strongly than that. He doesn't look like a killer, but then killers rarely do."

"I can't see what object he could have in trying to kill me."

Carolus could not resist this.

"Perhaps his wife really did die of ptomaine poisoning after eating an Archer and Buck product."

Lord Penge smiled, not altogether agreeably. Then, after saying that he would give the police what information he could about Trampler, he left Carolus and made for his library.

Almost immediately Carolus found himself button-holed

Eustace.

"Look here, Mr Deane. I can't help being frank. I'm not at all satisfied that we're doing all we can to protect my father."

"You told me."

"I don't mean just the security arrangements. I mean in every way. Are you making any progress?"

"You mustn't expect anything immediate from me. I know it is worrying for you to be unable to do anything and I know it must seem that I'm just dilatory. But the fact is, there's only one way I can go about this, and that is by investigating the murder of Ratchett. That simply can't be speeded up. It needs patience more than anything. Do you imagine, for instance, that if I had hurried into Mrs Carker's cottage, fired a few questions at her and rushed on to do something else I should have got any results this morning? Not for a moment. I learned a lot from Mrs Carker, but only by letting her talk."

"Yes. I see that. But . . ."

"I've got a lot of people to question yet. Of course I may not have to go right through the list. But the principle of the thing is there. I've got to find out who killed Ratchett. When I've done that the threats and problems will fall into place. I'll move as fast as possible, but I can't say more. It's like asking a gardener to hurry his flowers. Whatever is at stake, I can only go one way about it."

"I do see your point. But if this man, whoever he is . . ."

"Or woman."

"Yes. I suppose so. If this person strikes again before you've succeeded in identifying him . . ."

"I'm not a bodyguard. I came to solve a problem. You and the police must concern yourselves with protection. Let that be clear between us."

"You mean you think there may be another attempt before you have finished investigating?"

"I think you should be prepared for it."

"You take it very calmly."

"Not at all. I am really concerned. In fact, as your Mrs. Carker says, this won't do and I mustn't stop here talking! Would you, I wonder, be so good as to walk with me to where Ratchett was shot? I haven't yet seen the place."

"Of course."

"Perhaps we could start from the french windows of the library, as Ratchett did."

Their way took them first through the formal garden at the side of the house with its beautiful box edgings geometrically clipped and its fine urns and water-gardens. But soon they were out in the park itself following a foot-path which, if it could not be described as well-worn, was certainly distinguishable. They made towards the nearest group of trees, and Carolus, counting his paces, found that these were five hundred and ten from the house. Before they reached the trees, however, they passed two ponds quite close together.

"It was in the nearer one that the rifle was found," said Eustace. "And by the way, Scudd told my father this morning that they had checked, and it was Michael's. They can't tell exactly how long it had been in the water, but they think not more than a day or two, so it all fits in. It had been fired recently."

They walked on for twenty yards to the first of the trees, a great chestnut with a wide fork about four feet from the ground.

"This is where the murderer stood, according to the theory of the police. Apparently they've found some scratches or marks in the bark which suggest that he rested the rifle here when he fired. It would be easy for him to have concealed himself."

"Yes," agreed Carolus, "but it means that Ratchett must have passed within six yards of him. Wouldn't he have seen that it was Ratchett and not your father?"

Carolus was interested to notice how firmly Eustace clung to the police theory.



I don't think so. It was a dark night."

Was it? At seven o'clock? I find that lighting-up time on that night was only six fifty-five. Surely there must have been enough light to recognize someone at this distance?"

"Possibly, but I think not. I remember how dark it was. And Michael may have been shot later than we think. No one is sure of the time—seven or half past is all we know."

"You were out at that time?"

"I . . . went down to the stables for a moment at about seven. I was worried about one of the horses. We had just phoned for a vet."

"And you noticed the time?"

"Yes."

"But you did not hear the shots?"

"No. Everyone has been trying to work out what time they were fired. My father thinks about seven, but Piggott and Gribbley, who were in Gribbley's rooms over the garage when they were fired, are convinced that it was nearly half an hour later when my father phoned for them."

"Even so, I find it hard to believe that there was not enough light to recognize a man at this distance. If there wasn't, how was it there was enough to enable the murderer to shoot him so accurately? I presume those pegs mark the spot where the body was found. It seems to have been fifteen yards away."

"Ratchett seen from here would have been silhouetted, if you notice."

"Yes. There is that. I see it's possible. But I should like you to consider a few other contingencies. The murderer, whoever he was, might have been waiting, perhaps for several evenings, for your father to come out of the house. Your father occasionally walked over to Ratchett's cottage by this route to have a drink before dinner, a chat with Ratchett and a walk back to the house for dinner. It seems unlikely that a murderer who had come, say from London, could have known this. It is more probable that such a man would have simply waited every evening after dark till your

father should <sup>on</sup> day emerge, and when on Wednesday he at last appeared <sup>at</sup> to do so, the murderer followed him from a safe distance. Mrs Carker tells me that your father had not been across since Sunday last, so if I am right he would have had two nights at most of unsuccessful waiting. In that case he could not have used this tree. He would have been hurrying to come close enough and would have fired from where he stood."

"I can only tell you what Scudd has told me. The angle of entry of the bullets, the distance from which the rifle is judged to have been fired, all suggest it"

"Of course," said Carolus, eyeing the young man rather closely, "if the murderer knew your father's habits really well—better than anyone outside the household could possibly know them—he might have waited on this spot to shoot him, knowing that he sometimes went across to Ratchett's at this time for a drink. But as this is an innovation for your father, only someone who has observed him extremely closely and recently could possibly have taken the chance of waiting out here."

"Yes, what do you mean?"

"It is <sup>exac</sup> certain that he was shot in the back as he was going in <sup>mo</sup> his direction—that is, from the house to the cottage!"

"Oh, quite certain, I understand"

"Tell me, when Ratchett came up to the house by car, where did his car usually stand while he was inside?"

"Before the front door"

"So that since it wasn't there that day, an observer might suppose that he hadn't come up for his afternoon's work?"

"Yes."

"It's very puzzling."

"You're no farther on?"

"A little, perhaps," said Carolus. "I'm still only theorizing, but at least I begin to see a possible theory."

THAT EVENING there happened one of those things which are the nightmare of almost every childhood—the face of someone outside was seen pressed against a window. It is a strange thing about this that although in itself it would seem to carry no particular danger, there are grown men who find the thought of it frightening, especially if it happens on a stormy winter night and the face is an unknown one. There was no storm that evening, but the face was unrecognizable, and the apparition came at that hour when there are strange effects of light and darkness—at dusk, in fact. It was noted afterwards that it was also the hour at which Ratchett was believed to have been murdered—that is, about seven o'clock.

It was Piggott's duty to draw the curtains. Carolus had noticed this evening ceremony with some amusement and wondered in how many English homes it is retained. He could remember as a boy sitting with his elders and at a moment carefully chosen a housemaid in cap and apron would come in

“Shall I draw the curtains, ma'am?”

Perhaps she might be told to leave them for a little while —“we're enjoying the firelight”—or perhaps assent was given. Then the great plush things would be pulled across the window, their wooden rings rattling on the curtain-pole.

For Piggott it was half an hour's work to go round the house closing out the last of the daylight, and he did it, as he did most things, with efficiency and discretion. He had come up to the hall to begin when he heard a thing which neither he nor anyone else had heard in that house for twelve years or more, a shriek from Hermione.

She was in the little morning-room on the east side of the house, and Piggott was the first to reach it. He found her white and somewhat aghast, but standing quite firmly by the table.

"Quick! Someone outside," she said and pointed to the window.

Piggott was across the room in a moment, but it took a few seconds to push up one of the great sash windows and leap through it. As he said afterwards regretfully, he was too late. No one was in sight, and though he dashed off to investigate, he found no one.

The family began to gather, and Carolus with them. Eustace, Lockyer and Wilpey joined the search outside, but Carolus characteristically preferred to learn as quickly as possible what had happened.

"I had just come in to look for Beaver," said Hermione. (Beaver was her pug dog, and Carolus never knew if it was named after the quadruped or the Press lord.) "I usually brush him and Otto and Perks at this time . . ."

"In here?" asked Carolus.

"Yes. But I couldn't see him. I called him because the little devil hates being brushed and hides. Then I had the queer feeling—you know—that I was being watched. I looked across at the window and saw . . . well, a pair of eyes was about all. A hat was pulled down and something—a mask or a black muffler—came right up to them. It never moved. The eyes stared, but the creature never moved, and I let out a scream. I didn't see it go, but it went."

"It couldn't possibly have been a reflection or something?" suggested Lord Penge.

"No. Definitely not. Someone was there."

"In that case he'll certainly be caught. I thought this house was supposed to be guarded. Mr Deene, would you please come through to the library? I should like a word with you."

His calm was a lesson to everyone. But before he and

Carolus could leave, Ronald spoke to Carolus in that high-pitched voice of his.

"What does it mean? Has someone got into the grounds? Is my father in danger?"

"Yes," said Carolus.

"Do you mean that?" asked Lord Penge, still quite coolly. "It seems to me most improbable. If some intruder came up to the window he is unlikely to escape, and in any case is aware that his presence is known."

"You may be right," said Carolus, and they went to the library.

As he entered, Lord Penge stopped short.

"I don't think that window was open when I was here half an hour ago," he said.

The two men stared towards the window, which had been pushed up by about six inches.

"Do you think we should search the house?"

"I suggest that you call whichever of your men brought this tray and ask him about the window."

On the desk was a silver tray with a bottle of sherry and two glasses. Beside it was a medicine bottle.

"Yes, I'll ask Chilham. But he's getting on, you know, and may not remember a thing like that. He brings in my sherry every evening before I go up to change for dinner, though it's a long time since I drank any. When I am working he leaves his tray on a table outside the door, but this evening I must have left the door open so he could see I had gone upstairs. He also brings this beastly stuff." He indicated the medicine bottle. "Some vitamin compound, I understand."

Lord Penge had used his bell for one of his signals, and Chilham now entered.

"Chilham, will you remain at the door a moment and look round the room? Tell me if you notice anything changed since you brought in the sherry."

Chilham annoyingly did not glance towards the window, but stared at his tray.

"Yes, my lord. I brought your tray in and left it on the table just as it is. But I left your medicine bottle on the tray with the sherry and glasses, not on the writing-table, as it is now."

"Are you sure of that, Chilham?"

"Quite sure, my lord. If you remember, it is my invariable way of leaving things when there is a polished surface. I should be afraid to put a medicine bottle on the desk, for fear of marking it."

"Yes. I believe you do leave things on the tray. What do you think about this, Mr Deene?"

"I think you should leave the bottle untouched and report the matter at once to Detective Inspector Scudd. It's scarcely likely that the bottle will show finger-prints other than Chilham's and yours, but Scudd at least should be informed. The police will probably examine the contents of the bottle, too. What about that window, Chilham? Was it open like that when you brought the tray?"

"I think not, sir."

Scudd drove up to the house in prompt response to Lord Penge's call and did as Carolus had anticipated. The bottle would be examined and its contents analysed, he said. But when Lord Penge showed him the open window he questioned both the peer and his butler more closely. Had the window been open at all today? Yes, during the early afternoon. Who had closed it? Lord Penge himself. Had he applied the catch? He always did so, but it was possible that today he had omitted to do so. Scudd nodded and listened to an account of the apparition at the morning-room window, then said he would like to see Hermione.

"The house shall be searched immediately," he promised Lord Penge.

Carolus waited till Scudd had left them, then said, "I think the police will find poison in your medicine."

Lord Penge heard this in silence, then faced Carolus and spoke with unusual force.

"Can't anything be done at once, Mr Deene? Poison is a

filthy thing, and apart from my own personal danger it is very horrible to think that a poisoner may be at work here. I love my family and my home, and this threatens both, as well as myself. Can you give me no hope of a swift solution?"

"I can only say I have the beginnings of a theory and that tonight's events fit in with it. I want to make a number of enquiries from your family and staff before I can say any more."

"Yes, yes. Ask anything you like, but for God's sake try to put us all out of this unbearable situation. It is plain that the police are quite at sea . . ."

"Not necessarily. By the way, you had a chauffeur before Gribbley, I believe, who was taken to a mental home."

"Yes. Poor Worsdyke! I put him in a private home at first, but his wife said she would prefer that he went to one of the official ones. She had the idea that a private home would not try to cure him because they wanted his fees. He would have a better chance, she thought, in a State institution."

"Perhaps you could just check that he's still in confinement?"

"Oh. I see what you mean. But I scarcely think . . . however, I'll do as you say. Now, whom do you want to see?"

"Your younger son."

This caused another difficult silence.

"Is that absolutely necessary, Mr Deene?"

"Absolutely."

"Then perhaps I should give you certain information on a subject I hoped not to have to discuss. Ronald is not quite mentally normal."

"I had gathered that. I'm sure this must be painful to you, and I'm sorry. But you appreciate the position. What form does the abnormality take?"

"He has suicidal tendencies. I had to remove him from school, and before engaging a tutor I arranged for Lockyer

to have some training in psychiatry. He is able and I think conscientious, but we always have some anxiety with Ronald. Since these recent incidents he has become even more excitable than usual, and we worry about him a great deal. By all means have a chat with him, but try to go as gently as possible."

"Certainly. I'll promise you that."

Again Penge used his bell-pressures, and when Piggott answered he was despatched for Lockyer. The tutor entered.

"Oh, Lockyer, Mr Deene wants a chat with Ronald."

"I'm very much against that, Lord Penge."

"I'm sorry, but after tonight's events I don't feel we should have any scruples. I have explained the case to Mr Deene, and he will be very tactful."

"It's as you wish, of course. But I don't think Ronald should be upset by questions from an amateur detective."

"He won't be upset," said Carolus. "Where will I find him?"

"He is in what we call the schoolroom. Piggott will take you. You stay here, Lockyer."

The schoolroom was on the first floor, a big, cheerful room which had probably once been the nursery. Ronald was stretched in a basket chair, reading.

"Hullo," said Carolus.

"Oh, hullo. Have you come to interrogate me?"

Carolus grinned.

"That's it."

"Have a cigarette?"

"Thanks."

No one could have been calmer than Ronald, but Carolus knew enough to realize that suicidal tendencies might be of rare occurrence in a person usually intelligent and normal. He did not like his task, however, because there was only one way in which to approach it, and this might be a dangerous one.

"I'm probably going to be a bore," he said, "but I should like to know where you were going last night."



"Last night?"

"Well, in the small hours of this morning. In pyjamas, I mean."

"Oh that. You saw it, did you?"

"Yes. No one knows I did."

"I see. I don't mind telling you. But don't ask me *why* I did it, because I don't really know. I was going over to the ponds and the place where Michael's body was found."

"I thought so."

"I must have been half asleep."

"You must have been damned cold."

"I was afterwards. I didn't notice at the time."

"Were you looking for something?"

"Not exactly. I say, *who* wants to kill my father?"

"I don't know, Ronald. Honestly."

"What was all the fuss tonight?"

"Your sister thought she saw someone round the house."

"Oh."

"What did you go over to the ponds for?"

"I wanted to see the place. They wouldn't let me in the daytime."

"Why did you want to see it?"

"Look here, shall I tell you something? It might help you. I haven't told anyone else."

"I wish you would."

"Well, that evening when Michael was murdered I was out in the park. Whenever I go off on my own one or two of them usually follow me. Eustace did that evening, so did Lockyer. But I got well away. I could hear Lockyer shouting for me miles away. I was about a hundred yards from the ponds."

"Go on. This is good."

Carolus was trying to keep the thing on an easy level and seemed to be succeeding, for Ronald showed no signs of great stress or excitement.

"I lay down. I was tired. It was wet on the ground, but

cool. Suddenly I saw, right in front of me, Michael Ratchett walking away from my direction."

"You *saw*? But you say you were a hundred yards from the ponds, so you were even more from Ratchett. How could you see him?"

"I was a good way away, but he was lit up. It had been dark, and suddenly there was Michael lit up as though he was in the headlights of a car. Only there was no car. He was walking away from me, with his hands up like someone being held up at pistol-point in a film."

"How could you recognize him if he had his back to you?"

"I didn't at first. I thought it was F. ther. But I know now it was Michael, because when I saw that I jumped up and began to run like a hare to the house. Afterwards I heard who had been shot, so I knew that it was Michael whom I had seen."

"I see. Nasty experience."

"I didn't want to be questioned about it. They would want to know why I'd been out there and why I hadn't gone to help Michael. I went in quietly without anyone seeing me and came up here. You're the first person I've told."

"Good. Keep it between us, will you?"

"Yes. All right. But I expect they know you're asking me questions. What shall I say they were about?"

Carolus thought for a moment.

"Do you remember Worsdyke the chauffeur?"

"Good Lord, yes. He was crackers."

"Say it was about him."

"Right. I'll tell them that. I say, it's time we dressed for dinner. We shall be late."

"Thanks for telling me all you have."

The cook let them down fairly lightly that evening by the standards of that household, for when they reached the dinner-table Carolus, examining his little menu, saw no more than *Potage à la Crème d'Orge*, *Truite au Bleu*, *Canetons rôtis*, and *Glace au Moka* with *Artichauts à la Crème* and

*Pommes Nouvelles* as vegetables. The conversation both before and during dinner was general, no reference being made to Hermione's shock or the question of whether anyone had entered the library. Once more these were apparently nice, well-mannered people at dinner, once more their chatter was commonplace and their attitude to one another and the world at large seemed a kindly one. But when Carolus reminded himself that a member of the household had already been murdered, that little more than an hour ago another had screamed with fear at a strange apparition, that it seemed probable that an attempt had been made that evening to poison the head of the household, while that yet a fourth of them had just confided to Carolus that he had almost been present at the murder, Carolus found this spurious detachment and *bonhomie* a little sinister. It suggested that these people were all accustomed to playing a part.

Later that evening he was crossing the hall when Hermione stopped him.

"I'd like to talk to you, Mr Deene."

They moved over to the fireside, where they were alone.

"There are some things you're going to find out about us that I'd like you to know without enquiries. I think you're an honest person and also that you will understand."

"That's very nice of you."

"There's nothing much to know about me and Eustace. We're the usual country type and really do love hunting and shooting, though not so much fishing, which I think is cruel. I don't believe either Eustace or I have thought very seriously about anything but horses and sport in our lives until recently."

"The murder, you mean?"

"For Eustace, yes. For me . . . well, this is what I have to tell you. I met a man about a year ago. We want to get married. He's a young doctor with a practice near here. My father refuses to let me."

"That sounds hard. One would have thought a young

doctor was the sort of person welcomed by a father unless he has anything against him."

"He has. The young doctor is Chilham's son."

"I see."

"You do? No one else does. It's ridiculous. All my father can say is that his daughter can't marry his butler's son. 'Because I've paid Chilham so well that he could afford to give his son a profession, doesn't mean that my daughter can associate with him.' It's such nonsense, because we're *nobodies*, as everyone knows. But there you are."

"What's Chilham feel about it?"

"He's terribly upset, poor old chap. He has fits of indignation and anger. He can't very well leave because he's been with us twenty years or something and until Father pensions him off he can't be comfortable. So there you are. I shall probably just go off and marry Stanley sooner or later."

"Thank you for telling me that."

"Well, that's Eustace and me. Now Ronald. You realize that he's a bit odd, don't you?"

"So I am told. I find him charming."

"He is, poor sweet. But he has tried to kill himself several times. And he is horribly secretive. We never know what he knows and will suddenly come out with. It's been like that since he was a child."

"I see."

"There's one other thing you ought to know about us. My father and mother hate each other about as much as two people can. Haven't you noticed that they never speak? If they do it's to have a blazing row, but that doesn't happen often. For years we've lived with that—the two of them sitting at opposite ends of the table and talking, but never a word to one another."

"I had noticed it. But I've seen people who have been married a long time behaving in exactly the same way. It has not meant that they hate one another."

"Mother and Father do. I *know* it. So now that I've got all that off my chest, perhaps I can ask you one or two questions. Do you know who killed Michael?"

"I have something which a more optimistic person might call a suspicion."

"Why don't you tell us?"

"It's far too indefinite. I haven't a notion of what motive there can have been, for instance."

"Surely that's obvious. He thought Michael was Father."

"That's not absolutely certain, you know. And even then I know no motive he could have for killing your father."

"Tell me something else about it."

"There's nothing to tell. I don't think much of any of your alibis, by the way."

Hermione looked quickly at him.

"What's wrong with them?"

"They aren't alibis. Three of you at least were in the park when Ratchett was shot. I haven't talked to the servants yet, but I don't think theirs will be much better. However, that may not be so important."

"Whom do the police suspect, Mr Deane?"

"I don't know. An outsider, I think."

"And you? Don't you suspect an outsider?" She was almost pleading.

"Oh, a complete outsider," he said, and left it at that.

## 8

NEXT DAY was Sunday, and Carolus noticed that it was Piggott who served the breakfast.

"I hope Chilham's not ill," he said to Eustace, who was beside him.

"Oh no. This is routine. Chilham has Sunday mornings free for an extra hour or two of sleep. He's getting on, you know. Piggott usually drives over to the farm in the morning, but Gribbley does it on Sundays."

"I didn't know you had a farm."

"Yes. It's just for the house, really, and produces a good deal of what we need."

Carolus did not say that its staff and acreage must be considerable.

"Good idea."

"It's entirely Father's scheme. There's a small open truck with which Piggott goes over at the crack of dawn and brings back the milk, butter, vegetables, eggs and what-not for the day. It means we always get fresh things."

There were not many appearances at breakfast and Carolus was the last to leave the room. As he did so Piggott stopped him.

"Look, sir, could you come over to the garage presently? On your own, I mean. Gribbley and I want to tell you one or two things."

"Certainly. In about an hour?"

"Fine. Would you mind not saying anything about it?"

Carolus nodded and went to the hall, where the usual big fire was burning. He felt justified in taking an hour off and sat down to do the Ximenes crossword in the *Observer*. He would just have time to finish it, he thought.

He found Piggott waiting for him, and noticed how different from the correct footman the young man looked now that he wore a lounge suit.

"Would you come to Grib's flat?" he asked. "It's up these stairs."

Gribbley welcomed them to a room as neat as the cabin of a ship. Everything polishable shone and there was little or nothing merely ornamental. Carolus remembered that the two had been in the Navy together, the chauffeur having been a Chief Petty Officer.

"I don't know exactly what we've got to tell you," said Gribbley. "But I think there ought to be something, and you'll know what to ask."

"We didn't want to say anything to the police. Well, I don't like policemen. Never have."

"I don't think they had much use for us, either. Scudd only kept us a few minutes. Of course, each of us only has the other as an alibi. We were up here at the time having a drink before Piggott went down for the dinner. He had already drawn the curtains."

"You heard the shots?" asked Carolus.

"Well, it sounds a bit daft, but neither of us can be quite sure about that. They certainly didn't register at the time, but looking back I seem to remember them, and Piggott isn't so sure. Not very satisfactory for you, I'm afraid."

"You were in this room. Were any windows open?"

"There's always one open."

"What was the first you heard of the murder?"

"The telephone rang, and it was Lord Penge. He sounded pretty shaken—for him, I mean, because as you know he's a very calm man. He told us that Mr Ratchett had been shot and was lying on the footpath on the way to his cottage. We were to go straight there, touch nothing and see that no one else touched anything till the police arrived. We did that."

"You found the body at once, of course?"

"Yes. With a torch. We followed the footpath."

"Did you examine it?"

"Just made sure he was dead."

"How was the body lying?"

"Flat on his face with his hands in his overcoat pockets."

"You saw no one till the police came?"

"No one."

"Even as you were walking over?"

"No one at all. But I heard someone. It was just after we reached the body. From a long way over on the west side of the park I heard Lockyer shouting for young Ron. Then he must have given it up, because I didn't hear him again."

"How long do you think you were there?"

"Too long, anyway," said Piggott.

"It's rather hard to say. It seemed an age at the time, but looking back I think the police were pretty quick. It may have been half to three-quarters of an hour."

"How did you get on with Ratchett?" Carolus asked the question of Gribbley.

"I saw very little of him. He used to pay me every week, but he had his own car and looked after it himself. I had quite enough to do with the family cars. Piggott, here, knew him better."

"Yes. I used to call at his cottage for a drink now and again. He'd travelled a good deal, and once you got him talking was quite interesting about it. He lent me one of his guns to go rabbiting sometimes. He wasn't a bad sort."

"You like your job here, Piggott?"

"The money's good and I've got used to dressing up and that now. Can't say I ever *liked* it, though."

"You don't get on with Wilpey, the valet, I believe."

"He's all right. A bit pansy. Talks too much; that's his trouble. He's having an affair with one of the German girls."

"And the rest of the staff?"

"Well, Grib and I keep to ourselves, pretty much."

"Do you ever go down to the Duke of Suffolk?"



"Now and again."

"Know a character staying there called Trumper?"

"Is that the slob with the red face? I don't know him to speak to. Only seen him."

"Did you ever see him anywhere round here?"

"Here? No. He wouldn't have got near here. Since those anonymous letters started coming we've all had orders to look out for strangers and let no one into the house."

"Oh. Is there any other information? Even if it's no more than gossip it may be helpful."

"Gossip? There's bags of gossip. You know, of course, that the old man and the old lady never speak to one another?" Carolus noticed with some amusement that the last vestige of formal respect had left the manner and speech of the two men and they had become three individuals discussing the boss. "It's been going on for years, that was."

"I used to wonder why they didn't separate," continued Gribbley. "I think it's the money. She's supposed to be nearly as loaded with it as he is. They both love this place and the whole act, and neither could afford to keep it up alone. That's my idea."

"Row? If they do start you've never heard anything like it. The old man keeps cold, and she blazes away at him as though she'd got a Sten. Then they don't speak again for six months."

"I think a lot of *her*," said Gribbley. "She's an old sport. You'd think anyone built like that couldn't hop about much, wouldn't you? You should see her. And she drives that Jaguar of hers as nicely as you please."

"She drives herself?"

"Nearly always."

"Doesn't Lord Penge?"

"Never. The old man can't drive."

Carolus nodded and hoped more was to come.

"What other gossip can we tell him, Grib? You know about Chilham's son and Hermione, don't you? I thought

you would. It's gone round pretty well. Old Chilham's just about breaking up over it."

"There's young Ron," said Gribbley. "He's supposed to be touched, but I don't see it myself. He's one of the best of them so far as I'm concerned. I often wonder whether all this about his trying to commit suicide isn't just his own lark. To get his own way, I mean. I don't like that Lockyer."

"No, I don't," agreed Piggott. "Fancies himself."

"Takes liberties."

"Supposed to have been a boxer. If he ever was, he'd be useless now. All his muscle's run to fat."

"You say you distinctly heard him out in the park that evening?"

"Yes. Clear."

"And that would have been about a quarter of an hour after Lord Penge phoned you to go across?"

"Yes."

"Any more gossip?"

"There's Mrs Spotter."

They both grinned.

"Don't you know about Mrs Spotter?"

"Only that she's a television enthusiast"

"She's a bag," said Piggott rudely. "You ought to see her. Great, fat, lazy cow who can't even bother to look after her kids properly. And poor little Spotter thinks the world of her. Jealous as he can be, is Spotter. Imagines everyone's after that big slut."

"You sound very feeling about it," said Carolus.

"Well, he started on me once. As if I was interested in her. I told him I wouldn't touch his old woman with a barge-pole. Hang me if that didn't make it worse. He told me I wasn't fit to work in the same place as she did. He was going to give me a good hiding, so he said. He's only a little fellow. I told him he couldn't have it both ways. If he wanted me not so much as to look at his old woman, he should be pleased I wouldn't touch her with a barge-pole."

He's a decent little chap, but he's crackers when it comes to her."

"You said 'work in the same place'. Does Mrs Spotter work here?"

"She did then. It was before the Germans arrived. She was a housemaid. That's how Spotter picked up with her. She's a local girl, and he comes from London."

"Why did she leave?"

"There are several stories. Some say that Mrs Murdoe couldn't bear her, but I don't think that's true, because she was here some years. Some think it was just laziness. But there is a story that Spotter made her hand in her cards because he was jealous."

"Of whom?"

"Well, don't take any notice of this, because it's probably just a story, but they *do* say it was the old man. Mind you, it's some years ago, and she wasn't such a blowsy cow as she is now."

"Where do the Spotters live?"

"They've got the lodge at the West entrance, where you first came in. There's only one lodge there instead of the two at the East gate. Before they were married, Spotter lived over the stables, but afterwards they moved out."

"I think I shall go over to the stables and see if Spotter's there now. I'd like a chat with him."

"He should be."

"Thank you both very much for all you've told me."

"Only too glad. I hope you get the ——"

The stables were apart from the house and garages, discreetly among trees behind the West wing. There was the usual little clock-tower and the usual good smell of manure and horse-flesh.

Carolus found Spotter grooming a fine chestnut.

Here again was a very caricature of the traditional groom, a piece of 'colour' in the scheme of things so pronounced that at first it seemed impossible that it could be genuine. Spotter might have been a character-actor playing

the part of a groom in a country house in the 1890's. Could a real groom be so short and trim and bandy? Could he whistle through his teeth as he groomed? Could he have a striped waistcoat and gaiters, short side-whiskers and a forelock which he touched as Carolus approached? Yet here it all was, as large as life and twice as unnatural.

He evidently thought that Carolus had come, as other guests had done, to arrange to go riding, and began to recommend the horse he was grooming.

"Thanks. I should like to. Perhaps tomorrow. It was something else I came to see you about."

The friendliness and animation at once disappeared from Spotter's face.

"What's that, sir?"

"I've been asked by Lord Penge to try to discover the truth about this murder."

"Oh, I don't know nothing about that. Not that, I don't know nothing about."

"We don't always know what we do know," said Carolus, trying to keep up with Spotter's verbal back-somersault.

"I do. I know what I know and what I don't know, and what I know is that I don't know nothing, not about no murders nor nothing, I don't."

"Where were you when the shots were fired?"

"I don't know when the shots were fired, so how can I know where I was or where I wasn't?"

"About seven o'clock?"

"I can't remember nothing like that; nor can't no one else, not if they don't make it up, they can't."

Carolus wondered how to break down this sturdy defence by double, treble, quadruple negatives.

"Perhaps your wife would remember where you were."

"No, she wouldn't, nor wouldn't say nothing even if she did, not if anyone was to offer her I don't know what not. She doesn't know, anyway. My wife's nothing to do with it and doesn't want to know nothing about it, not if you was to want to try to tell her, which I don't suppose you would."

She was over at the lodge at the time, not larking about nor anything of the sort. She was putting the children to bed, if you want to know."

"How do you know that?"

"Because she told me so when I got in, or I wouldn't have said nothing, would I?"

"When you got in? Then you were out at the time?"

"I haven't said nothing of the sort, so it's no good trying to make me say what I can't, is it?"

"I wonder why you are so evasive."

"Haven't I had enough, not to say too much, with the police on at me not to hold back nothing and now you not leaving it alone?"

"I understand that Mr Eustace paid a visit to the stables at about seven?"

"No, he didn't do nothing of the sort."

"You were here then?"

"When he didn't come I was, but not all the evening I wasn't. I can't stay working for ever and leave the wife not knowing where I've got to. No, Mr Eustace never came out here before dinner that evening, though I'm not saying him and Mr Lockyer weren't out in the park looking for young Ronald; not that they need to worry, because to my mind there's nothing wrong with him and he wouldn't do nothing anyone wouldn't like, not . you was to pay him, he wouldn't."

"I'm inclined to agree with you there. I find him a very pleasant young man."

"Not but what some of them wouldn't like to make out he's no better than them because he's supposed not to care whether he lives nor whether he doesn't."

"I have a feeling, Spotter, that there's something about this whole business you know and keep to yourself."

This drew a very cascade of mixed negatives from Spotter.

"No, there isn't nothing of the sort, nor isn't likely to be, neither. I wouldn't hold back nothing from nobody unless

it was none of their business, and there's nothing for me to hold back because I've not seen nothing, nor heard of nothing neither."

"Not?"

"No. Not a blind thing. I don't mind no one else's business for them nor yet not look after my own. It's not as though I hadn't got no wife and kids to think of and not let starve, as I might not be able to stop if I didn't know when not to interfere in what's no business of mine."

"Why did your wife stop working in the house?"

"That's got nothing at all to do with nothing you're concerned with. Not that she couldn't have not given her notice when she did, only I didn't want her not having her home with me and never knowing when she wouldn't get her day off because it wasn't convenient. Besides, I didn't want to think nothing might happen I wouldn't want to."

"Such as?"

"Never mind, but I didn't like some things others had told me which needn't have happened if she hadn't been there."

"Yes?"

"That's all there was to it. I never say what might not be the truth."

"Never?"

"No. Not for nothing I don't."

Carolus absent-mindedly stroked the long nose of the horse Spotter was grooming, and the chestnut responded by an affectionate downward movement of the head.

"I'm not saying that's not funny," said Spotter, "because although old Cæsar's never not friendly with anyone, no one's known him take to no one in particular, not since we've had him. You had much to do with horses, sir?"

"Quite a bit," said Carolus, who thought it wiser not to parade details. He *had* had 'quite a bit to do with horses,' but he knew that as a bait to Spotter this would lose effect if he appeared proud of it. He continued to fondle Cæsar. He saw Spotter throwing wary side-glances at him.

"Not," said Spotter at last, "that I never go so far as to say I'd not seen nothing that mightn't be in your line."

Carolus kept silent.

"I wouldn't even say that it mightn't have been on the day when Ratchett was shot."

Cæsar's caresses were growing fulsome, his head going up and against Carolus's jacket.

"Nor that it wasn't not a few minutes after them shots."

"Which you heard?"

"I wouldn't say nothing like that," said Spotter cautiously, "but it can't have been a minute or two, not more, after when young Ron comes tearing in here from the park, not knowing what he wasn't doing, as you couldn't help seeing from the way his eyes weren't looking at nothing."

That was vivid enough and Carolus nodded.

"Spotter!" he says to me, 'you're never to say you've seen nothing of me, whatever else you don't say,' he says, and I wouldn't never have done if I didn't know it wouldn't do him no harm. 'Why?' I asked. 'I've seen something out there I don't want to have seen, and you'll know all about it presently. Only don't tell them you've seen me, because I'm going up the back staircase to the schoolroom.' I told him not one of them wouldn't get nothing out of me, but I don't reckon you'd do nothing to do the boy no harm, so there you are."

"Thank you, Spotter. There's nothing else?"

"Not if you wasn't to stop asking me questions from now till tomorrow morning, neither me nor my wife. I don't know nothing and she don't neither, so it's no use your not believing that. It's not as though I haven't told you all I don't disremember. Not unless you want to know that not a week before the murder a nasty-looking nosy, red-faced beggar in the public bar of the Duke of Suffolk was asking me a lot of questions one night. Someone had told him where I worked, and nothing wouldn't satisfy him but coming and sitting next to me and not stopping wanting to

know I don't know what not about what time his Lordship was here and what time Ratchett was there."

"Did you tell him?" asked Carolus.

"Not so much as wouldn't cover a threepenny piece, I didn't, and wouldn't have done neither, not even if he hadn't put me off by not so much as calling for no more than a half-pint. Not that I couldn't buy my own, but not when anyone wants something and won't take no for an answer."

"Wouldn't he?"

"No. He wouldn't. And if there's one thing I don't like at no price, it's anyone who won't never take no for an answer, not if you give it them I don't know how many times."

"It is annoying. I'm most grateful to you, Spotter. You've told me several valuable things."

Before he walked away Carolus tried to tip him.

"No," said Spotter. "Not for that I wouldn't take nothing."

The whistling noise started again between his teeth.



CHILHAM WAS in the hall.

"Your pardon, sir, but his Lordship would be pleased if you would go to the library."

"Certainly, Chilham."

"And . . . I ventured to wonder, sir, whether there might be any matter you would wish to discuss with me or Mrs Murdoe, the housekeeper."

"There is nothing specific, I think."

Carolus had the impression that Chilham was relieved at this.

"On the other hand, I daresay it would be helpful to me if we could have a chat," Carolus added.

"With pleasure, sir. I need scarcely say that any information we have is at your disposal. The police questioned both me and Mrs Murdoe in the most perfunctory way."

"When could I see you?"

"Mrs Murdoe ventures to suggest that you might like to take a cup of tea in her room this afternoon."

"I should be delighted."

"At about six o'clock, sir?"

"Fine. I'll see you then."

Carolus found Lord Penge alone, and apparently in his usual quiet good spirits.

"Two things have turned up," said Penge, "which I think I should tell you at once. Inspector Scudd has been to see me this morning. He has no clues yet, but knows enough to show that you were right. There were no strange finger-prints on the medicine bottle and the contents contained sufficient poison to make one dose of the medicine a lethal dose. Do you think of that?"

"Interesting," said Carolus.

"Do you think that someone entered this room by the window and poisoned it?"

"It looks like it. On the other hand, how could anyone be sure he would not be disturbed?"

"As to that, you know my strict rule that no one shall enter the room during the afternoon and early evening? He would surely only have to know where I was to be certain that no one would be here."

"Not necessarily. If the household knew that you were not here to be disturbed, anyone might have come in. He could not be sure of having enough time in the room to do what he intended."

"No. I see that."

"Where, in fact, were you? Do you happen to remember?"

"I was here till about a quarter to seven. Then I decided to go up to change. I did not wait for Chilham to bring my sherry and medicine, though he usually brought them about that time. I went to my bedroom."

"Where is that?"

"Exactly over this room."

"Did you switch on the lights?"

"I must have done. I remember that Pigott had not yet drawn the blinds, and I went to the window for a moment to look out across the park. I am, as I have told you, very fond of my home and saddened by what is going on in it."

"So you would have been visible to anyone watching from outside?"

"I suppose so. Yes. It didn't occur to me. It was while I was there that I heard my daughter tell Sam and came down at once."

"I see. It makes it possible that, that he waited till Chilham had been to the library, then he returned, knowing that you were not there. Did anyone else in the house see you on your way upstairs?"

"No one, so far as I know."

"Wilpey was not here?"

"No."

"Still, the library window is puzzling. Why on earth would it have been left open? The intruder must have been anxious that nothing should indicate his visit."

"There is a very natural explanation for that. Try to close the window for yourself."

Carolus went across, pushed up the window and began to draw it down. At the point it had reached on the previous night it stuck fast.

"I have intended for some time to call the estate carpenter for that," said Penge. "It always sticks there. It *can* be closed with some difficulty, but a man pulling it down from outside would probably not be able to get it farther, particularly if he was in a hurry."

"There is another point, though," said Carolus. "If someone entered the library from outside and poisoned your medicine, surely his first thought would be escape. Why on earth should he have waited to peer in at the morning-room window?"

"For that, I own, I have no explanation. It seems an insane thing to do. But then, as you know, I am more than half convinced that we're dealing with a madman."

"That may be, too. However, Lord Penge, I think you should face the possibility that someone *in* the house did this and opened the window to suggest that it was an intruder."

"You know that I cannot and will not accept that possibility. Besides, it leaves your objection unanswered. If it was done by someone in the house, why should he have troubled afterwards to go out—presumably by these french windows—and peer in at the room next door?"

"Unless it was to demonstrate further that it *was* an outsider. I own that is rather unsatisfactory, because his action might—as in fact it did—warn you that someone had entered the library and tampered with your medicine."

However, that kind of guesswork won't help us much. What was the other thing you wanted to tell me?"

"Oh, that. In view of your questions about my former chauffeur Worsdyke, I have made enquiries. He was released from the mental home with a clear bill of health on February 26, just a week before the first threatening letter was received."

"Was he? Do you know where he has been since?"

"At his home at Eastbourne, about twenty miles from here. He has apparently behaved quite normally, so far as is known."

"May I ask how you obtained this information?"

"I sent Lockyer over to Eastbourne to his home this morning. He did not see Worsdyke, who was in bed, but he saw his wife."

"Worsdyke has not been seen in this vicinity?"

"There is no report of it."

At lunch that day Carolus noticed that for the first time the family was thoroughly subdued. They had probably been told, he supposed, about the attempt to poison Lord Penge, and it had brought home to them the gravity of the situation more effectively than the death of Ratchett. Scarcely a word was spoken over the lobster salad, the vol-au-vents or the lamb cutlets, and Lockyer, whose manner in the presence of Carolus was usually surly, seemed to be the only one doing justice to the meal.

Carolus found it melancholy to be with unhappy people whose anxieties he could as yet do nothing to allay, and it was with some relief that at four o'clock that afternoon he followed Chilham up to the housekeeper's sitting-room. He had not much hope of helpful information, but experience had taught him that this often came from the most unexpected quarters.

Here at last was a break from the true-to-type conventionality of the people he had met at Highcastle Manor. Mrs Murdoo was not an intimidating woman in black with a bunch of keys, but a little, well-dressed bright person in

her early fifties who welcomed him with a rather pretty smile. Chilham, too, had lost some of his pomposity, and the three of them were soon chatting amicably.

"Perhaps we ought to tell you at once," said Mrs Murdoe, "that if it had not been for what has happened, Mr Chilham and I intended to announce our engagement this week."

Carolus congratulated them, and the housekeeper went on:

"I've been a widow for nearly twenty years and Alec for eleven, and whether we stay here or not we want to finish our lives in partnership. I have no children and Alec's only son is grown-up and has his practice as a doctor, so apart from our work we have no ties. But of course that's not what you want us to talk about."

Carolus, who was still a little stupefied by the realization that 'Alec' referred to Chilham, wanted them for the present to talk of anything that occurred to them.

"I have been with Lady Penge since I was a young girl," said Mrs Murdoe, who spoke with no trace of Scots accent. "My husband was a warehouseman in the True-Lime works which belonged to Lady Penge's father. Lady Penge was an only daughter, and I was more a companion to her than anything else. Then when she got married I came here with her to run the house, and I've done so ever since. Miss Allie was always a jolly, friendly person who liked a joke. It's only lately she seems to have got a bit more serious. Her father, Sir Albert Nutter, was just the same, and when he was Lord Mayor of London that year he gave everyone a laugh by the things he did—having squeakers put on their chairs at a Mansion House banquet and I forget what else. Of course, he was a very, very rich man, and it all came to 'Miss Allie—Lady Penge, I mean—and that was before death duties were as bad as they are now.'"

Mrs Murdoe had poured tea from a silver teapot and paused to ask Carolus about his requirements in sugar and milk. But afterwards she continued:

"Yes, I suppose it would be hard to say which had most,

she or Lord Penge, but it's certain that only between them could they afford to keep up this place. If you could see what it's like, Mr Deene, when we're entertaining! Well, my job's like being manageress of a great hotel in which none of the guests are given bills. I shan't be telling secrets if I say that last year Alec's income from gratuities alone was over a thousand pounds. But Lord and Lady Penge share the expense of it all, mostly for the children's sake, because of course you know they don't Get On."

"I had gathered that."

"Such a pity! It has been much worse of recent months, and I always used to say—didn't I, Alec?—that Ratchett had something to do with it. Don't ask me what, but whenever he came into the picture there were ructions."

"Really? You mean . . ."

"I don't really know what I mean, but Alec's thought the same."

"It did seem that Ratchett was a cause of discord between them. But I don't think I can be more definite than that."

"Ratchett doesn't seem to have been popular."

"He wasn't with me," said Mrs Murdoe firmly. "I never liked him."

"He paid all the wages?"

"Yes," said Chilham.

"In cash?"

"Yes, always. His Lordship had an account at a bank in Hastings, and Ratchett went there once a week to draw the money. Though of course Mrs Murdoe and I were paid by the month."

"Had you ever reason to have a cheque on his private account?"

"I hadn't personally, but I've seen cheques of his several times. Some months ago, for instance, he asked me to pay his garage account as I was going into Hastings."

"Where did he bank?"

"At the Royal and Colonial Bank in Bexhill."

Mrs Murdoe had listened to this, and now prepared to resume.

"Tell me about the evening of the murder," suggested Carolus.

"We both have an hour or two to ourselves between five and seven, usually. Alec has served tea and has no duties till he takes Lord Penge's sherry down at a quarter to seven. Anything that had to be taken to the library when they were working was always left on the little table outside, because there were strict orders that they shouldn't be disturbed. Alec took the tray and left it there at a quarter to seven, and came back here to finish our game of bezique."

"A good game?"

"Fascinating. Then at about seven o'clock the house telephone went and Hermione asked Alec to bring drinks for her and Eustace to the morning-room. He went down and was gone some time . . ."

"How long?"

"About a quarter of an hour, I should think," said Mrs Murdoe.

"I was chatting with Miss Hermione," said Chilham.

"Was Eustace there?"

"No, I understood he had gone out to the stables. They were both worried about one of the horses."

"He didn't reappear while you were there?"

"No. Then the next thing we knew was Lord Penge on the phone saying that Ratchett had been murdered in the park."

"Would you mind telling me what you were talking to Hermione about?"

Chilham gave Carolus a quick, shrewd look.

"I think you know already, sir. She and my son wish to become engaged. My son is a doctor," Chilham added with a hint of pride in his voice.

"Thank you. I did know something of that, but I'm glad you told me. Now one last question—perhaps the most important. Had there been any calls that afternoon?"

"No one had been admitted, but at about six o'clock Piggott asked me to take over duty in the hall for a while. He had to see his friend Gribbley about something. While I was there a most undesirable sort of individual arrived and asked to see Mr Ratchett."

"Did he give a name?"

"Yes. Trumper."

"How had he come up to the house?"

"On foot, apparently. There was no sign of a vehicle."

"A good walk from the village."

"Yes. He said he had been to Mr Ratchett's cottage but received no reply."

"You told him, of course, that he could not see Ratchett?"

"Certainly. After a minute or two he made off. I may be wrong, but I thought his walk was a little uncertain."

"Thank you both very much for being so helpful. Do you think I could get my own car out? I don't want to disturb Gribbley on Sunday afternoon."

"Lord Penge wouldn't like that, sir. I'll phone and tell Gribbley to bring it round."

Within fifteen minutes Carolus knocked on the door of the lodge in which Mrs Carker lived. She was once more alone.

"Carker having gone up to the house, as the saying is, to do his frames and hot-house as usual on a Sunday afternoon. I said to myself as soon as I saw your car, I said, 'It's that gentleman that was here the other day asking this, that and the other about Mr Ratchett.' Come in, sir, if you've got a minute, because there's a nip in the air and we can't stand here being blown about, can we? Was there something else you wanted to know?"

"Yes, Mrs Carker. You remember telling me about the man staying at the Duke of Suffolk who came to see Mr Ratchett one afternoon?"

"Him? Yes, I remember him, though I often wonder how it is we call to mind one and not another."

"You didn't tell me that he came again on the afternoon of the day on which Mr Ratchett was killed?"



"There! I knew there was something! You can't keep everything in your head, can you? I said to myself only yesterday, 'I'm sure there's something I've forgotten to tell that gentleman', though what it was I couldn't for the life of me remember. Yes, that's right. It must have been close on six or thereabouts that I heard him over there, knock, knock, knock on the door till I said to myself, 'He'll break that down if he's not careful, and that'll be a nice thing.' So I put my head out of the door and said, 'There's no one in,' I said, 'because Mr Ratchett's up at the Manor with his Lordship and won't be back till I don't know what time, so you may as well save yourself the trouble of knocking,' I said. I might have thought to tell you that before, only there you are. You can't always do right, can you? I mean it would be a nice world if you could, but we're none of us perfect, and it must have slipped out of my mind, as you might say."

"You saw no one else that afternoon?"

"No, I can't say I did, but of course that doesn't mean anything, because I had my hands full what with one thing and another, and when I'm working I don't really know what is going on. A whole army might have marched in without me knowing any better, so there's no more to be said, unless you wanted to ask me about anything else, when I'm sure I'd only be too pleased."

"Yes. There is another thing. What keys had Mr Ratchett?"

"Keys? Well. It's funny you should ask. He had two lots. There was his keys he always took with him here, there and everywhere. They were on a ring and were only his door key, the key of the front door of the Manor and his key for his car. Then he had another lot which he used to keep at home. To tell you the truth, I've got them here. I said to myself when I saw them after he'd gone, I said, 'Those oughtn't to be lying about for any Tom, Dick or Harry to pick up, because you never know what they're the keys of,' so I put them in my bag when I was in there, meaning to

send them up to the Manor by Carker as soon as the moment came as you might say. So perhaps you'd like to take them now, sir, and I'm sure I'd be ever so grateful."

"Thank you, Mrs Carker."

"It's a pleasure, I'm sure, sir. I'll just pop upstairs and get them, then I shall have them off my hands. Are you finding out who it is wants to kill his Lordship? I do hope you do, because we can't go on like this from one day to another, not knowing what's going to happen next, as the saying is. I mean, you don't know what to think, do you? Well, I'll just go and get those keys. Only it gives you the fidgets knowing there's someone about and not knowing who it is. I said to myself only yesterday, 'It's not like it used to be,' I said, 'before all this star'ed, upon my word it isn't.' I shan't be a minute getting them."

When at last Carolus received the keys he examined them long and thoughtfully, then put them in his pocket. His leave-taking should have been a lesson to Mrs Carker, for he rose, said good-bye, and went.

## 10

HE FELT as he entered the house a sense of oppression which was not new here, but more acute than during his first hours. The obstinate extravagance evident everywhere, the sombre beauty of the place and the knowledge that all its inhabitants, however they might conceal it, were in a state of nerves, made Carolus himself uneasy and dispirited. He went at once to his own room and sat down to smoke a cigarette and consider the problem before him.

He had not been there long before Wilpey, the valet, came in.

"I say, sir, I've been trying to get hold of you. I've got something right up your street."

"It shouldn't have been hard to find me," said Carolus, who was not in the mood for ebullience.

"Oh, I don't know. First you were out with Gribbley and Piggott. I obviously couldn't come and talk to you there, could I? Especially when you hear what I've got to tell you. Then you lunched with the family. Then you had tea with Mrs Murdoe and Chilham. I mean, you could hardly expect me to barge in, could you? As soon as you left them you went out. So I've rushed in here to catch you."

"Well, what is it?"

"I say, sir, you sound awfully blah. I mean, this ought to be quite useful stuff. You see, Frieda and I—that's one of the German girls—we're . . . I mean, she and I . . . well . . ."

"You're having an affair."

"Well, if you put it like that. I mean, we haven't slept together or anything, because she's frightfully strict and everything. I might even marry her. I mean, I'd never

thought of marriage actually, but Frieda, she's absolutely . . . I mean, she's . . . I mean . . ."

"Quite," said Carolus. "What did you want to tell me?"

"Oh that. Yes. Well, Frieda heard something. It's about two months ago now, just before the anonymous letters started. I mean, she's not madly inquisitive or anything, but she couldn't help hearing this because she was in Lady Penge's bedroom when Lord Penge came into the sitting-room next door and didn't know she was there. They had the *hell* of a row."

"Who?"

"Lord and Lady Penge. Frieda says she was quite frightened. It went on for hours."

"Honestly, Wilpey, you mean well, but I don't want to hear about domestic quarrels."

"It's not just that. I mean, everyone knows they don't get on. It was the things they said to one another. Frieda's English isn't perfect, but she soon realized this was no ordinary set-to. She can't remember it all, of course, and there were parts she didn't hear, but I've got her to tell me all the pieces she can remember, and I've written them down. They're only bits and pieces, but I think you ought to hear them."

Carolus automatically stretched out his hand for the paper Wilpey held.

"I think I better read them to you," Wilpey said. "I mean, my writing's pretty dreadful. These are from Lady Penge."

'Why have you never told me? I have a right to know.'

'It's absolutely wicked, Arthur. If it wasn't for the children . . .'

'But I don't *want* to depend on Ratchett.'

'In that case I should have to leave you.'

'It's an unbearable situation.'

'How dare you assume that?'

'If I agree it will only be for the children's sake.'

'I hate and despise you, Arthur. Yes, *despise*.'

'Ratchett! Don't talk to me about Ratchett. He may be loyal to you, but . . .'

'Sometimes I feel I could kill you, Arthur.'

There. You can't say that sounds much like an ordinary quarrel, can you?" ended Wilpey, with a touch of pride.

"I don't know. Married people say all sorts of things to one another, as perhaps you'll find out one day. What did your friend happen to overhear from Lord Penge?"

"Not nearly so much, I'm afraid. He wasn't so excited, and he spoke quietly. But you may be able to make something of it."

'I did everything in my power, Alithia.'

'There need be no consequences at all if you keep your head.'

'Certainly not. Eustace is not affected.'

'Of course I have arranged it. You know perfectly well I can.'

'I tell you it was a hundred to one chance.'

'You're quite unreasonable. You'll force me to . . .'

'No. I shall do nothing of the sort.'

That's about all, though Frieda says he mentioned Ratchett, too. Is it interesting?"

"Yes."

"Good-o. I'm glad I've added something to your information. Are you getting anywhere, though? I mean, it's a bit creepy in a house where one murder's already been committed and another expected any minute."

"Is it?"

"Well, I mean, isn't it? Expected, I mean? Now what about your clothes, sir? We don't dress on Sunday evening. Cold buffet."

"I suppose I shall have to go down, said Carolus. "I don't feel as though I shall want to eat anything—ever again."

"They do rather tuck in, don't they? You'll manage something when you get there. I make the cocktails to-night. Chilham's off and Piggott has the table. We have some funny odd jobs, really. Piggott's in charge of the gun-room, for instance, and I do the post."

"The post?"

"Yes. Haven't you seen the little letter-box in the hall? Every day at six I take it down to Mr Evans at the shop."

"Just explain that, will you?"

"Well, Lord Penge is very particular about the post. Always has been. So what he does is to have this little letter-box which unhooks off the wall. It has a Yale lock, and only he and Mr Evans have keys. Mr Evans has the general shop and post office in the village. So I take the box and hand it to him in the grocery part of the shop and he unlocks it there, takes out the letters and puts them in the letter-box."

"Why?"

"Because he can't accept them like that as postmaster. Against the rules. So what he does, he takes them and posts them as a shopkeeper, then takes them out of the public letter-box and sorts them as a postmaster. The idea is that everyone here who posts a letter, family or staff, knows that no one can poke about or see who he's writing to or anything. It's quite a good idea, really. I mean, before I met Frieda I was writing to a girl I met in Southend, and I knew if that Piggott got to hear of it I should never hear the last of it, but I could pop my letters in there and feel quite happy about it."

"That's interesting."

"Why? Oh, I believe I see. You're thinking of that anonymous letter. You mean it could have been sent by one of us here in the house and no one would be able to tell. You know, sir, I think you're set on putting everything down to someone in the house. I mean, you don't think Mrs Murdoo's going to send death-warnings, do you?"

Carolus smiled.

"I only said it was interesting. But you're right, of course. It means that the last anonymous letter could have been posted in the house."

"Yes, I know what you were thinking. All I hope is you don't suspect me. Well, I'll go and do his Lordship. I hope you enjoy your cold buffet."

That Carolus did not. Indeed, the superabundance and excellence of the food at Highcastle Manor were beginning to tell on him. Oyster patties, salmon mayonnaise, chicken in aspic, plovers' eggs and a ham mousse seemed to him sufficient for any quiet family supper, but when they were backed with fillets of sole, dressed crab, a galantine, foie-gras and half a dozen salads, the thing became excessive. A Chartreuse of strawberries, a chocolate gâteau, a macédoine of fruits, a Neapolitan ice and a trifle could only be ascribed in that variety to greed. The family seemed to enjoy it, however, in a rather silent and serious way. All of them, that is, except Lockyer, who had gone home for the remainder of the week-end.

When Carolus was recovering from it with a cup of coffee, Eustace sought him out.

"You remember what I suggested the other day about testing the security of the house? I half wondered if that business last night had something to do with you, till I heard about the poison."

"No. Nothing."

"All the same, it doesn't look as though our defences amount to much, does it? Someone was able to get into the park, come up to the house, open the library window, climb in, poison my father's medicine, get out through the window drawing it down as far as he could behind him, look in at the morning-room and get away again."

Carolus looked curiously at Eustace

"Do you really believe that's what happened?" he asked.

"What else? The window was open and the medicine poisoned."

"And someone was seen at the morning-room window.

But we really must use a little common-sense in these things."

"You don't believe it?"

"Put it this way. I don't think there is any reason to think that the security arrangements made by the police against intrusion from outside are ineffective. However, if you really want me to test them, I will see what I can do."

"Everyone seems to take it so casually!" complained Eustace.

"I don't, I assure you. A man has been murdered—shot in the back. I certainly don't take that casually."

"I meant the danger to my father."

"I don't think your father is in any danger tonight, at any rate."

"You don't? I suppose that's something. I'm worried sick about it, Mr Deene."

"And about something else, I believe?"

"What do you mean?"

"Have you been quite frank, do you think? With the police and me?"

"Of course I have. I've nothing to hide."

"Quite sure?"

"Look here, what are you getting at?"

"I'll tell you. It boils down to the old stock question. Where were you at the time of the murder?"

"I've told the police. I left my sister for a few minutes to go out to the stables."

"Did you go to the stables?"

"Yes."

"Was Spotter there?"

"Was he? I can't remember. I was worried about one of the horses."

"Then I'll tell you. He was there till eight o'clock, and you didn't come out. Where were you?"

"What the hell does it matter? You don't suspect me of trying to shoot my father, do you?"

"No. That I don't."



"Then?"

"I want to find out, beyond any doubt at all, who killed Michael Ratchett."

"What am I to do with it?"

"You were in the park when he was killed."

Silence.

"Weren't you?"

"If I was it had nothing to do with it. I was nowhere near the ponds."

"I'm still anxious to know where you were when the shots were fired."

"I didn't notice the shots. But I must have been right over by the gravel-pit at the time."

"What did you go there for?"

"I went with Lockyer. We were looking for young Ron."

"I see. I cannot think why you haven't explained that before."

"I would have if it had been necessary, but there didn't seem any point. I neither saw nor heard anything. It's not very easy to tell anyone about our trouble with Ronald."

"When did you return to the house?"

"I don't know the time. Hermione was in the hall and told me what had happened. I had left Lockyer over there."

"Thanks, anyway, for telling me all this now. Is there anything else you think I ought to know? No? Then I think I'll say good night. I've got a pretty hard day tomorrow."

Carolus slept badly, and was glad when the first light came into his room. He decided to get up as soon as he politely could and see this highly organized household beginning the day. It was barely eight o'clock when he reached the hall, but in it the big fire was blazing, doubtless on the embers of yesterday.

Carolus went out to find a glorious April morning. On his way to the garages he saw a little open truck being

driven very fast up the drive and recognized Piggott at the wheel of it.

The ex-sailor pulled up and gave him a cheerful good morning. Carolus could see what Eustace had meant when he talked of supplies from the farm.

"Just got to take these to the back door," said Piggott, "and I'll be over at the garage. Grib's there polishing your car."

Carolus continued his way, and found that Gribbley had given the Bentley Continental a brilliant polish.

"I should like it immediately after breakfast," Carolus said.

"I'll bring it round."

Neither of them used the feminine pronoun for a car, Carolus because he disliked it and Gribbley because for him 'she' was a ship.

Carolus watched as Piggott drove his empty truck into the yard and skilfully backed it into its place in one of the garages. This was built for two cars only and stood well away from the rest of the buildings, out of sight of Gribbley's flat.

"I ought to be the chauffeur," Piggott said, grinning, "and Grib dress up as the footman."

Immediately after breakfast Carolus set off in his car for Bexhill. He did not drive fast, but reached the ugly little town soon after ten and enquired for the Royal and Colonial bank. Without much difficulty he found it, a building as pretentious as most bank premises, a façade of bad marble, plate-glass and bronze fittings. He asked for the manager.

"Mr Flinch is engaged," said a young cashier. "What did you want to see him about?"

"What *did* I want to see him about? I *do* want to see him. How long will he be engaged?"

"I couldn't say. Have you an account?"

"Here? No."

"Perhaps you want to open one?"

"Perhaps I do. Apart from these speculations I want to

see the manager on an urgent matter as soon as he is free."

"I'll tell him. But Mr Flinch likes to know what it is in connection with before he sees anyone without an appointment."

"Very natural. Tell him I come from Lord Penge."

The cashier looked and behaved as though someone had come up from behind and kicked him suddenly and hard in the backside. He jerked upwards, fled through a door behind him, sped back again and said rather breathlessly, "He'll see you now."

Carolus found a round and shining man already on his feet. His bald head, his wrist-watch, his links, his collar and cuffs, his glasses and his teeth all gleamed.

"Good morning. I understand you come from Lord Penge. What can I do for you?"

"Lord Penge has asked me to try to clear up the mystery about the death of one of your clients, Michael Ratchett."

The name or the news seemed to deflate Mr Flinch and he at once sat down with scarcely a wave of his hand towards a chair for Carolus. Was it an illusion or had the sun gone in? Carolus had the impression that the bank manager's gleam had been switched off.

"Ratchett. Yes. He had an account with us. Quite true."

"A large account?"

"Look, Mis-ter Rer, I can't possibly discuss my client's affairs with unauthorized persons."

Carolus, like most of us, detested being called 'Mis-ter Rer' and spoke rather sharply.

"Of course you can't. I don't want you to. My question was a very general one."

"Even so. It won't do. Quite impossible I'm afraid. I understood that you had come to represent Lord Penge in some business matter."

"You thought I had taken Ratchett's place?"

"It was the natural assumption. I had hoped perhaps

Lord Penge . . . However. Now, Mis-ter Rer, is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Yes," said Carolus, who was not in an equable mood after several days of over-eating. "You can stop calling me Mis-ter Rer and at least tell me whether Ratchett had a strong-box here?"

"What did you say your name was?"

"I didn't. But it's Deene."

"Well, Mis-ter Rer Deene. . . ."

"God!" said Carolus.

"You put me in a difficult position. I scarcely know whether the information you require would be a breach of confidence or not. Perhaps, since you are authorized by Lord Penge, in all the circumstances I might go so far as to say that, yes, he did in fact have a strong-box here."

Carolus dived in his pocket and, watching the manager's face closely, put on the table one of the keys Mrs Carker had given him yesterday.

"Is this the key?" he asked.

Mr Flinch examined it, but remained unexpectedly poker-faced.

"You go too far," he said. "It would obviously be incorrect for me to identify or not identify the key of a strong-box belonging to a man recently murdered. The police, his executors, perhaps . . ."

"But that *is* his key, isn't it?"

"Mis-ter Rer Deene, you force me to say that these enquiries are untimely and quite against customary usage."

"I'm glad you know the customary usage in a murder case. I don't, and I've been concerned with several. I will explain to Lord Penge what it is in this case."

Mr Flinch hesitated.

"If I were to tell you on your producing a key and claiming that it was that of a certain strong-box that it was in fact the key, or at least that it looked like it, I trust you would not suggest that without the presence of the legal executors, the police and perhaps a Justice of the Peace we should

do anything so flagrantly out of order as to think of opening the box, would you?"

"Certainly not. I just want to know if this is the key."

"In that case, Mis-ter Rer Deene, with every reserve and between you and me, without prejudice and before no witnesses, I think I may go so far as to say that it looks as though it might be."

"Thanks. That's all I wanted to know."

"Ah." The manager gleamed again. "Good day, Mr Deene."

"Good day, Mis-ter Rer," said Carolus and escaped.

## 11

THE SECOND chore Carolus had set himself that morning was scarcely more attractive than the interview with Mr Flinch; it was to have another talk with Trampler. He drove up to the Duke of Suffolk and happened to meet Major Stour, the proprietor, as he was crossing the hall.

"Good morning," said Stour. "I was hoping you would come in. That fellow we were talking about . . ."

"Trampler."

"Yes. S'traordinary thing's happened. Fellow's got some money. Don't ask me how. Must have been soon after you saw him on Saturday, because that same evening he came to my office, asked for his bill and paid it in notes. S'traordinary, wasn't it?"

"I suppose he must receive money sometimes."

"Fellow's like a dog with two tails. Buying drinks in the bar on Saturday night."

"Is he there now?"

"Fellow's always there. Can't get him out of the bar."

"I want a word with him."

"You'll find he's pretty impossible just now. Strutting about like a peacock."

"I think I may have to deflate him a little."

"Hope so. Fellow gets on my nerves."

It was true that Trampler seemed to lean across the bar with a new bravado. He flicked the ash from his cigarette and said loftily to Carolus, "Come to ask me again why I went to see Ratchett?"

Carolus said, "No."

"That's good."

"I know now."

"Eh?"

"I said, I know why you went to see Ratchett. Give me a Scotch and soda, please," Carolus added, turning to the barmaid. She returned from contemplating the sunlit journeys of clouds to pour his drink.

Carolus could feel the uneasiness of Tramper beside him.

"Oh, you do, do you?"

Carolus ignored this.

"Nice day," he said to the barmaid.

"Not bad," she answered to the wall above Carolus's head.

"And what do you think it was I went to see him about, since you're so clever?"

"A bit breezy," went on Carolus to the barmaid, "but it's grand to have some sunlight."

"Yeh-es," sang the barmaid to the ceiling.

"Come on," said Tramper. "What was my object in seeing Ratchett?"

"Blackmail," said Carolus. "I think I'll have another Scotch."

"What d'you mean, blackmail? You can be had up for using words like that. That's slander, you know."

"A little more soda, if you wouldn't mind."

"What is this story, anyway?"

"Oh, the story. That was a not very ingenious affair about ptomaine poisoning."

"It was true!" said Tramper. "I can show you the proof. Only they called it botulism."

Carolus looked suddenly interested.

"Did they now? Suppose you tell me the whole story?"

"Why?"

"Do you really want a reason? Let's say it will certainly do you no harm and might possibly help you."

"I live at Eastbourne," said Tramper sulkily, "or rather I did till a few weeks ago, when my wife died."

"How many weeks?"

"Hell, I don't know. About five. We had a part of a house furnished. The wife worked for an estate agent."

"What did you do?"

"Oh, various things. Bit of photography at one time, only I got into trouble over that. I still can't see why, because I used to sell a lot of the photos to 'body beautiful' publications. If it wasn't wrong for them to publish the photographs, why was it wrong for me to take them? That's what I want to know."

"What else?"

"Lots of things. Went racing for a while, only my nerves wouldn't stand it. Of course when the shortages were worse there was always plenty to do. Nylons, and that. But just lately things have been very quiet with me. If it hadn't been for the wife, I don't know."

"Been inside?"

"Well, only a few weeks at Brixton. Nothing, really. That was over a car."

"A driving offence?"

"Not exactly. It's a long story. Anyhow, there we were, the wife and I. Ticking over. Enough for a drink now and again. A decent place to kip. Nothing much to complain of. Till this night about four or five weeks ago when she had this ham loaf."

"Which ham loaf?"

"Archer and Buck's. Bought it at the shop on the corner. Well, we used to have mostly tinned stuff. You do when you work late."

"Did you work late?"

"Well, naturally we wanted a few drinks in the evening. Used to go to a pub called the Golden Hammer and have one or two. Then at closing time we'd come back and eat what there was."

"And what was there that night?"

"I told you, ham loaf."

"What else?"

"We had to have some vegetables. Spinach and beetroot, we had."

"Tinned?"



"Of course it was. You don't think the wife was going to start cooking things at that time of night, do you?"

"She didn't even heat the spinach?"

"No. As a matter of fact the gas for the cooker had given out and we didn't happen to have any silver coin."

"The spinach and the beetroot were not Archer and Buck's products, of course. They don't sell tinned vegetables."

"No. But it was the ham loaf that did it."

"How do you know?"

"Stands to reason. Meat. Meat's the first thing to go off in a tin."

"You're quite wrong there. I happen to have studied the figures on this. Or rather the only ones available—those in the United States. Food-poisoning from tinned foods is extremely rare—in fact from the commercial producers there has not been a case since 1825. What cases there have been were from home-tinned foods, and French beans have produced more than any other."

"I'm sure it was the ham loaf, anyway."

"Why? Did you notice anything about it?"

"To tell you the truth, old man, we'd both Had a Few. I don't think we'd have noticed it if it had been rotten. I didn't eat much that evening. I wasn't feeling all that well. I'd mixed 'em a bit, I think. But I was there when the wife had her supper—the three little tins—and I'm sure it was the ham loaf."

"Weren't the empty tins examined?"

"How could they be? Nothing happened till breakfast time next morning, and the dustbins had been emptied then."

"What were the first symptoms?"

"The wife felt dreadful. First she complained of seeing double, then she said she couldn't swallow. She couldn't speak properly, then couldn't get her breath. Dreadful. I went for the doctor and he came round and knew at once what it was. He gave her something, but it wasn't much good. She was taken to hospital, and died next day."

"I wonder why you weren't affected."

"To tell you the truth, I didn't actually eat anything at all that night. Didn't feel like it. I was a bit under the weather and only wanted to get to bed."

"Would you mind telling me the doctor's name?"

"I don't know why you're so interested in all this."

"I'm investigating the murder of Ratchett. Have a drink?"

Perhaps for the first time in many years, Tramper did not instantly answer that question.

"Murder? What's that to do with me? I'm telling you what happened to my wife."

"So far as I'm concerned you're in the picture. You spent half an hour with Ratchett two days before the murder and you went up to Highcastle Manor an hour or two before he was shot. If your explanation of these turns out to be true it should help to clear you."

"Of course it's true. The doctor's name was Boncourt. He'll tell you. He signed the death certificate, didn't he? Respiratory paralysis due to botulism, whatever that means. I know it did for the wife. She's had it and is pushing up the daisies. Yes, I *will* have another drink. Gin and pep. Cheerily ho!"

"You haven't yet told me how this brought you here."

"Obvious, isn't it? Here was I deprived of my wife with no life insurance on her. I only had to start an action against Archer and Buck to be paid enough damages to put me on easy street for the rest of my life. Stands to reason. What firm could stand the publicity? Why do you never see cases like that in the paper? Because they're settled out of court, that's why."

"So you went to a solicitor?"

"Couldn't afford it, old man. You know what solicitors are. I've had quite a bit to do with them. Mind you, I may have to, in the end. But I thought I'd give them a chance first."

"But you hadn't even any real evidence that the ham

loaf was responsible. What about the firms who tinned the beetroot and spinach?"

Tramper looked uncomfortable.

"Well, if you want to know, old man, between you and me I'm having a go at them as well. Just in case. One of the three of them did for my wife, and just because we can't be absolutely sure which—though I'm still pretty certain it was the ham loaf—I don't see why one should get off scot free."

"But you chose Archer and Buck for your closest attention. Why didn't you write to the firm?"

"Well, it seemed like providence that old Penge should live here, right on my doorstep."

An odd way of putting it, thought Carolus, remembering Highcastle Manor.

"So you came straight here?"

"After I'd settled things up in Eastbourne. Not that the wife had anything much. As a matter of fact I got what there was on Saturday night, from her few bits of jewellery and that. Yes, I moved here and went to see Ratchett. You see, my business, this advertisement lark, I can do from anywhere almost, so I thought I'd work from here while we were getting the thing settled."

"Did Ratchett give you any encouragement?"

"I couldn't make out what he meant. He said it was no affair of his or old Penge's, and that if I thought I had any claim it should be made to the firm. Then he seemed to think it over and told me to hang around for a few days while he saw Penge to find out whether he would do anything. That's why I stayed here. And that's why I went up to the house that afternoon."

"I see."

"Mind you, it's awkward, now that Ratchett's been bumped off."

"Yes. I wonder the police haven't been to see you."

"They have. Well, they would, wouldn't they? I know Scudd of old. Now, are you going to have a drink with me? No? I shall have just one more. Gin and pep, please, Pam."

"Who are you calling Pam?"

"You, dear. Well, cheerily ho!"

Carolus left him in order to telephone to Highcastle Manor and excuse himself from luncheon. He had seen the menu when Chilham brought it in at breakfast for Lord Penge's approval, and he really did not think he could face hors d'œuvres, red mullet, eggs in cream, veal cutlets, chocolate pudding and a large array of varieties of cheese. He decided instead to take a chance on Major Stour's offering of lentil soup, shepherd's pie and treacle tart. By any ordinary standards this would be quite inedible, but after a few days at Highcastle Manor the prospect was less intimidating.

He had decided to do, or appear to do, what Eustace had begged him, and make a small test of the security arrangements. It had occurred to him that he was seeing the household too much from within, as if he belonged to it, and he wanted to get a glimpse from the outside. It would be interesting to see what these people did in his absence: whether they took advantage of it for any purpose, whether they ceased to play their parts. He realized that he had no hope of seeing more than some indicative flash, of being lucky enough to catch sight of some one coming or going, of finding out some small thing that would help his enquiries, but it was worth a trial, anyway.

After lunch he went to the largest garage in the town, drove his car in and saw the proprietor privately. He asked whether it would be possible for him to hire a motor-cycle for a few hours. The garage itself had not one, but the proprietor suggested to Carolus that he should ask Bert, one of the mechanics who came from a distance each day and had a Matchless. Bert was sent for and after deep and seemingly anxious thought agreed to lend his bike to Carolus. He also, on enquiry, produced a set of overalls and a pair of goggles, with which Carolus equipped himself.

He decided that he would make a circuit of the park, keeping as near to its boundaries as possible. He had ridden

a Matchless motor-cycle during the war and found it, as motor-cycles go, smooth and comfortable. He set off from the village with the sensation of being the Invisible Man, so totally unrecognizable had the bike and get-up and goggles made him.

He went slowly past the single lodge at the West entrance, remembering that it was occupied by Spotter's wife, described by Piggott as a 'bag', a 'lazy cow', a 'big slut', yet reputed to have been once on terms with Lord Penge of a kind to make her husband jealous. As he passed he saw a woman in the doorway of the lodge who might answer to some at least of Piggott's unflattering epithets. She *was* buxom, blowsy and idle, and she had the remains of good looks.

Carolus turned his motor-cycle and stopped in the road right in front of the lodge. He put the cycle on its stand and stooped down as if to examine something in the engine. After a few moments the woman called across in an indolent voice:

"What's the matter? Won't it go?"

"Got to adjust it," said Carolus.

"I don't like those things," observed Mrs Spotter.

"They're very useful."

"I wouldn't get on the back of one for anything."

"You ought to try."

"Not me. Besides, my husband will be home."

"Too bad."

"I did once. Years ago, before I was married. Went down to Brighton Races. I shall never forget it. Laugh? Only I hadn't got the weight I have now. D you live round here?"

"I pass through pretty often."

"I'm fed up with it. Too quiet. I like somewhere with a bit of life."

"Don't we all?"

"I bet *you* do." She laughed lazily. "What is there to do here? Nothing."

"Haven't you got television?"

"Yes, but it's only on certain hours. Here, did you see last night?"

"No. I'm afraid I didn't."

"It was a scream."

Carolus knew that the correct reply was, 'Go on, what happened?' but couldn't make it

"I'd ask you in for a minute if it wasn't for my husband. You never know when he's coming home."

"I must get on, anyway."

Just then Carolus saw a car coming down the drive from Highcastle Manor and recognized Lady Penge's Jaguar. He dropped his motor-cycle from the stand and said good-bye to Mrs Spotter.

"Ta, ta," she said. "Look after yourself."

He followed the Jaguar at a distance, and when the car stopped at a cross-roads outside the village he passed it, let his engine quieten down, then turned and rode back. He was in time to see Lady Penge climbing back into the driving-seat. Just beside the point at which she had stopped the car there was a letter-box. He did not trouble to follow the Jaguar any more after that.

When he returned to the park he drove straight to the East gate and found it closed. Instead of Mrs Carker emerging, a policeman came and asked him his business at the Manor. Carolus gave some feeble story about an estimate for decorating the kitchen quarters which elicited some fairly shrewd questioning from the constable. He was then refused admittance.

Not even bothering to do the same thing at the West gate he rode into the town and returned the motor-cycle to its owner, who looked somewhat relieved. He reached the Manor in the early evening and went up to his room. He now had a useful quantity of information which needed co-ordinating and considering and he spent a couple of hours at his desk. The main problem was rapidly dissolving.

## 12

CAROLUS DECIDED to be the first at the breakfast table in the morning because it was there that the family received their post. But he was disappointed if he was expecting any sensational reactions, for Lord Penge did not appear, and the only person who made any comment on the letters read was Lady Penge.

"Cara's having another baby," she said to Hermione. "I did think she'd have a free year, didn't you? I suppose I shall have to go."

Hermione stared at her mother.

"She said nothing about it last night. She was on the telephone about Roger. She wants to dump him somewhere."

"That's probably why. Her letter talks of 'any moment', but you know what she is. However, there's no one else, so I shall go at once. Today."

"You wouldn't like to take me, would you?"

"Love to, but of course I can't. They can only just manage me, and the two of us would be out of the question."

Lady Penge turned to Carolus. "We are speaking of my niece, Mr Deene. Or rather my cousin's daughter, which seems much the same thing. She's making up for the small families of the last fifty years in our family. She already has four, and is now expecting her fifth."

"You're leaving, Mother?" asked Ron.

"Yes, dear. Must. You know Cara."

Lady Penge waved her packet of letters in explanation, but did not show any of them the letter which had summoned her. Her announcement seemed to cast a gloom over them all.

But when Carolus met Lord Penge a few minutes later he found a different outcome of the morning's post.

"I've had another of these dam' letters," he said bitterly. "You'd better come and look at it, Deene."

"Where posted?"

"It has the Highcastle postmark on it."

Carolus examined the piece of paper. It was, he thought, of the same quality as that used for the previous letters, and the type appeared similar. But this was the shortest note of all. It read simply: *Any minute now. You know why. Spider.*

"This is the first since Ratchett's death, and doesn't mention that. Isn't it rather strange? Is it possible that they are not connected?" asked Lord Penge.

"I think they're connected all right."

"You mean that in your view the person who sends these letters shot Michael Ratchett?"

"Yes."

"I suppose that makes it a far graver matter. It means that my life really is in instant danger. I did not feel that so much about the poisoning episode of Saturday evening, oddly enough. There seemed to be something almost unreal about that."

"I think there was."

"But this is not unreal. The flippant, confident way in which it is written only makes it more threatening. Are we dealing with a madman, Deene?"

"I don't think so. By the way, I am going down to Eastbourne today."

"Indeed? Something connected with Worsdyke?"

"That and another matter. I have to see a Doctor Boncourt."

"You know what you are doing, of course. I can only ask, as I have previously, that you bring matters to a point."

"I think I shall be able to do that very shortly now."

"I shall be glad to be relieved of this anxiety. Whatever your conclusions may be."

With Worsdyke's address in his pocket Carolus drove



down to Eastbourne. He thought as he passed the colonies of new pink houses, the tidy petrol-stations, the plate-glass shop windows of the village stores, the bright little gardens in which forsythia and aubretia seemed invariable, the tricked-up inns and the highly clipped hedges, how Sussex, perhaps above all counties in England, had degenerated in the past fifty years. Could a modern Belloc sing now of the downs and inns, the ale and songs of this smug and trim region, with its State-organized life and its complacent, orderly people? 'Clean of officious fence or hedge', wrote Kipling of the Sussex downs in 1902, and said, 'none more fair than she'. Oh, well, that was more than half a century ago and no doubt the downs with their fences, and the villages with their television acrias, and the magnificent road surfaces with their neat white lines, and the endless strings of cars, and the noise, and the people one meets all show great progress since then.

He found Eastbourne the very hub and centre of this smugness, a new red town beaming with self-satisfaction. But he did not expect self-satisfaction from Worsdyke or his wife, on whom he intended to call first.

They lived in a semi-detached villa in a long street of identical ones, and as Carolus knocked at a numbered door a canvasser was knocking at the one beside it, standing not two feet away from him. The Worsdykes' door was opened by a woman whom Carolus correctly took to be Mrs Worsdyke; she had a pleasant, intelligent face and listened patiently while he explained himself.

"Mrs Worsdyke, I would be very glad if I could have a few minutes' chat with you. I have your address from Lord Penge, who knows I am calling on you this morning."

"What's it about?" asked Mrs Worsdyke calmly. Carolus recognized in her that splendid English phenomenon—a sensible woman. Sussex might have become an ugly and conventional place, its life grown dull and regimented, but thank heaven it could still throw up this kind of human being, wise, tolerant, imperturbable and honest. There was

no fuss or fear in her question; she simply wanted to know whether he was a salesman, a pressman, a policeman or an employee of Penge's before deciding how to deal with him. In these circumstances Carolus knew that he should be direct and frank.

"Lord Penge's secretary was murdered a week ago tomorrow. I am not a policeman but I am investigating the matter. I think you could help me with some information."

"I don't really see how I can, but still you come in and I'll try, if there's anything I can tell you."

"Thank you."

Carolus found himself in a pleasant and lived-in 'front room', not one of those chill mausoleums behind lace curtains which no one ever seems to visit, but a cheerful place with two comfortable chairs, one of which he took.

"May I go right ahead, Mrs Worsdyke? It concerns your husband, and may be painful to you."

"Oh no. All that's past with Harry, if you mean anything about his trouble. He's as sane as I am now, thank God, and the doctors say we've nothing to worry about."

"That's good. You won't mind if I ask a few questions?"

"Go ahead."

"When his mental trouble first came did it in any way centre on Lord Penge? I ask because I have been told something of the sort at Highcastle."

"Not at all. What Harry had was a sort of religious mania. It was his upbringing, I believe. His parents were horribly strict Chapel, and as a boy he was given hell-fire and damnation and all that. He has told me very often he couldn't sleep at night for fear of flames and Satan. Then he grew up and went in the Army and lived like other men and forgot all about it, but I suppose it was there still, underneath it all. Then suddenly it began to come out."

"I see. He bears no resentment towards Lord Penge at all?"

"Not a bit. In fact we're both quite grateful to him. He

behaved very decently about Harry, and helped with expenses at first. Harry always speaks well of him."

"I don't think I need ask you the other questions, Mrs Worsdyke."

"Ask them if you want to. I shan't mind."

"Well, for some two months someone has been writing anonymous letters to Lord Penge. Don't suppose that I have any reason to suspect your husband of this, but I should like to satisfy myself and those concerned that he couldn't possibly have had anything to do with it. You see, there is the fact, which is probably just a coincidence, that he came out of the mental home a week or two before they began."

"I'm quite sure it couldn't be Harry. First of all, he's never had secrets from me, even when his trouble was worst. Secondly, he's absolutely sane and sensible now and wouldn't think of doing such a thing. Then again, he'd have no opportunity, because he's the slowest letter-writer you ever saw, and he comes straight home from his job every day. He's a conductor on the buses now, you see. I just know it's not Harry."

"And you convince me, Mrs Worsdyke."

"You can meet him yourself, if you like. You'd know at once it couldn't be him."

"I don't honestly think I need to. It may be conceited of me to think I'm so clever, Mrs Worsdyke, but I trust my instincts. I know you believe what you say. But your husband hasn't, by any unlucky chance, been over at High-castle since he's been back with you, has he?"

"Yes, we were over there last Wednesday. It's my home, you see. I met Harry when he was working at the Manor. My father's retired now, but he used to be the baker in the village. Of course after Harry had come back they all wanted to see him."

"Of course."

"So Wednesday's his free day, and we went over on the bus, and caught the last bus home at eight o'clock."

"You were together all the time?"

"Every bit of it."

"Thanks very much, Mrs Worsdyke. There's nothing else I want to ask."

"You know who killed Mr Ratchett, do you?" asked Mrs Worsdyke, in her turn showing some curiosity.

"Yes. I can tell Lord Pengc as soon as I return to Highcastle."

How pleasant it was to hear no repetitions, no last-minute irrelevances, no nonsense of any kind. Mrs Worsdyke answered his questions, asked only one herself, kept to the point and left it at that. Carolus could scarcely restrain himself from congratulating her on being a sensible woman.

It was far otherwise with his other visit in Eastbourne. He had expected to find Dr. Boncourt a prosperous, perhaps somewhat pretentious practitioner with a large house and expensive motor-car. He found a dingy little grey villa with an unpolished name-plate. The door was opened by a scrawny woman with dyed red hair who spoke hurriedly.

"You can't see the doctor till after two. He won't be back from his rounds till one, then he's got to have his lunch. I've got it on now and must run."

"Thank you. I'll come back."

"All right," said the woman, closing the door in Carolus's face in her frantic haste to return to her cooking.

Carolus ate a rather dismal hotel lunch, then returned to the villa to find it impregnated with the smell of food. The doctor, it seemed, had eaten something with fried onion, while a boiled cabbage had been served with it. Carolus was shown into a little room with chairs covered in a material that could scarcely be called imitation leather. The place was like a railway waiting-room.

Dr Boncourt entered. He was as dim and dingy as his home. He wore a suit that needed the attention of a dry cleaner and a shirt and collar that he had kept on one day at least too long. He had a hopeless little moustache and was still masticating.

"Yes?" he sighed, looking wearily at Carolus through his spectacles.

"I'm investigating a murder," said Carolus rather sharply.

Dr Boncourt did not react in the least dramatically.

"Oh yes," he said as though he heard the words every day.

"Six days ago," said Carolus, trying to give some weight to the matter, "a man named Ratchett was shot in the back in the park of Highcastle Manor."

"Oh yes," repeated the doctor.

"There are several suspects, including a patient of yours. Or rather the husband of a patient of yours."

"Mm," said Dr Boncourt, unmoved.

"This man had been up to the house two days earlier, and went up again two hours before Ratchett was shot."

"Ah." There was no curiosity in the sound.

"He gives as his reason for this," said Carolus, bashing on regardless, "that he wished to see Ratchett on a matter connected with his wife, your patient, who had recently died."

"They do," said the doctor, still not showing any sign of awakening interest.

"The man says you signed the death certificate, attributing the woman's death to respiratory paralysis due to botulism."

"I expect I did."

"I should have thought you would have remembered it. Botulism, I understand, is an extremely rare disease. You don't recall the case?"

"No," said Dr Boncourt. Carolus expected him to yawn at any moment.

"Perhaps you have some record of it?"

"I daresay."

"It is rather an urgent matter. If this man Tramper . . ."

The doctor leapt to his feet as if a violent electric shock had been administered to him.

"*What* name did you say?"

All his lethargy had gone. He stared at Carolus.

"Tramper."

"Why didn't you say so before?"

"You do remember? You can give me the details?"

"Of course I can! Seventeen pounds eighteen shillings and sixpence. That includes the anti-toxin. The dishonest brute! You realize he deliberately bilked a doctor. A doctor, mind you. Remember the case? I should think I do. Where's he living now? Came to me as a private patient. He wasn't on anyone's panel, I understood. Can you give me his address? Disappeared from here in the night. Seventeen pounds eighteen shillings and sixpence. I shall put my collecting agency on to him. How dare a man go off like that owing money to a doctor? Do you know him? How can I get hold of him? It isn't as though it was a trifle. That's a considerable sum."

"I am anxious to know certain details about the woman's case. Were you able to diagnose at once?"

"Yes. Yes. I went to a great deal of trouble. Got her into hospital. That's the gratitude the man showed. I went round to his rooms and found him gone. Done a moonlight. Left no word of where he was going."

"There never was any doubt that your diagnosis was correct?"

"None. Botulism. He had the bill all right, because I gave it to him myself. I know that kind of man. I wasn't a doctor in the prison service for nothing."

"And this type of poison could not be administered by another person? A drug that had the same effect?"

"No, no. *Clostridium botulinum*. You don't think I can afford to lose money like that, do you?"

"And is it true that his wife died?"

"Died? Of course she did. He must have had the money to pay. They lived in quite a decent house. I shall start proceedings. Where did you say he was?"

"Why 'of course', doctor? Are the effects of botulism always fatal?"

"Nearly always. I knew there was something wrong about that fellow. I ought to have asked for my fees in advance. Scandalous thing to do to a professional man. When I was a prison doctor at least I never had scoundrels of that sort."

"Was there nothing remarkable about Mrs Tramper's death?"

"Nothing. Died in the Gladstone Hospital. The man came to see me next day and promised that my account should be settled immediately. I should never have let him leave the house without paying."

"To what did you attribute the botulism? What had she eaten which could have caused it?"

"I've no idea. She had it, that's all. Now I come to think of it, he offered me a post-dated cheque, but I wouldn't take it. I don't suppose it would have been met, anyway."

"Did you make no report on the matter so that other food from the same source should be examined?"

"Of course I did. It was all gone into. It just shows what comes of trusting people like that. You could tell he was dishonest."

"You see, Doctor Boncourt, this man has been attempting to obtain money from Lord Penge on the grounds that his wife died through eating one of the products turned out by Lord Penge's firm."

"Has he got it? Has he been paid? I might be able to have my account collected."

"He has not got it and is not likely to. There is no evidence, it appears, that his wife's death was in any way due to a product of Archer and Buck, and even if there were it would not be a matter for private negotiation."

"Then you see no prospect of my recovering my fees?"

"Very little. Tramper received some money last Saturday from the sale of his wife's effects, but I should think most of it would be spent already."

"Disgraceful! I . . ."

"At least, Doctor Boncourt, you can confirm that this man Trampler had a wife who died of food poisoning and that one of the things she had eaten during the last twenty-four hours of her life was tinned food manufactured by Archer and Buck?"

"I don't know what she had eaten. The man gave the name of the product to the health authorities, and that was the firm he mentioned. But he was evidently such a deceitful fellow that it is impossible to trust his word. A man who will go off owing money to his doctor will do anything."

"Even, perhaps, poison his wife?"

"Oh, certainly. But in this case he had not done so. There was a post-mortem. Evidence was found. No question. Now what did you say his address was? The Duke of Suffolk Hotel, Highcastle. Thank you. I shall take immediate steps. Perhaps I had better serve a summons? Of course his living in a hotel is highly unsatisfactory. Increases the difficulties. Upon my soul I wish I had never left Wormtonville. At least there the patients couldn't run away without paying. Yes, that's your way out. Good afternoon."

Driving back to Highcastle, Carolus stopped his car beside a country letter-box. He took out of his pocket an addressed envelope, pulled out the contents, added a few words in pencil, sealed the envelope and posted it. The last loose end was tied up. It was time to act.



## 13

CAROLUS HAD an extraordinary sensitiveness to atmosphere, mood and even coming events. As some people are warned by a headache of a thunderstorm approaching, Carolus had frequently been able to sense evil and danger before they had manifested themselves. From the moment he entered Highcastle Manor that afternoon he was aware of an unnatural tension.

The first person he saw was the one he would have thought least likely to show anything of nerves or mental strain: the footman Piggott. But as he took Carolus's coat he said in a low, anxious voice, "Can I have a word with you?"

"Yes. What is it, Piggott?"

"Been given the sack," said Piggott. "I had a blazing row with the old man today."

"What about?"

"Nothing, really. You know how it is. Everyone's on edge. Honestly, it was as though he was *trying* to pick on me. It started because I was a bit late answering his bell. Then he said something about my never being round when I'm wanted, and I said I didn't think that was right. He said I was always over in Gribbley's flat, and I asked when I had been there at a time when I ought to be on duty. So he said on the afternoon Ratchett was murdered and Chilham had opened the door to a man who had turned out to be a suspect. I don't know, it went from one thing to another, and I ended by losing my temper and saying I hoped this letter-writer *would* get him, the old so and so."

"Did anyone hear that?"

"Yes, Chilham did. I said it loud enough, anyway. I

thought he'd have me out of the house straight away, but no, he said a month's notice."

They were interrupted by the entrance of Chilham, and Carolus made his way to the fireside.

He was having tea there when he was joined by Hermione.

"I do *hate* it when mother's away," she observed. "There was no need for her to go, though I suppose I don't blame her, with all this panic going on."

"I understood your cousin . . ."

"Oh yes. Cara rang up today. It's quite true, but she could manage without mother. After all, this will be her fifth."

Somewhere in the house a telephone was ringing, and in a moment Chilham came to tell Hermione that she was wanted on the phone. Even in that very commonplace announcement Carolus sensed something unusual. Chilham spoke in his usual quiet voice, but he looked at Hermione as he spoke as though she would gather something from his words, as perhaps indeed she did. She jumped up and without turning to Carolus walked away.

Chilham turned to Carolus.

"His Lordship would like to see you, sir."

"Again?" said Carolus.

"He just asked me if you had come in, and when I told him you had, he said, 'Ask him if he would mind coming in to see me.'"

"Very well."

Carolus found Penge placidly reading Trollope. He put his book down and invited Carolus to the armchair beside him.

"I have gathered from you, Mr Deene, that either you have a solution to this mystery or you are very near one."

"I have one."

"You are confident that it is correct?"

"Quite."

"Do you not think you should at once reveal it?"

"I intend to do so tomorrow. For a reason which you will understand then, I prefer to wait another twenty-four hours."

"During which time the danger to me will continue?"

"I do not believe that anyone will attack you in the house, Lord Penge. If I did so, I should not hesitate to explain the case as I see it."

"I see. I certainly shall not go out of the house, so if you are correct I have nothing to worry about. But what about yourself, Mr Deene? Isn't it possible that the murderer realizes that you have discovered his identity and might think his only safety lay in killing you before you revealed it?"

"He would be very unlucky. I have taken the obvious precaution of posting my notes on the case."

"But he wouldn't know that."

Carolus shrugged.

"It is a chance one must take. My reason for waiting another day is an important one."

"I don't like it, Mr Deene. I accept your assurance that I am in no danger in my house tonight, but remember that one poor fellow has already been killed in my place. I do not want to think that anything could happen to you while you are staying here. How would it be if I let it be known to my family and staff that you had already written the details of the case? It could be arranged that the news should reach the village in an hour, if your suspect is a local person."

"If you wish. I'm really not very worried."

"I won't ask you questions, but of course I feel very much more than curiosity. Our whole family life is at stake."

"I'm sorry to have to keep you in suspense. I hope you will believe that it is necessary. By the way, do you know who are Michael Ratchett's executors?"

"No. I think he had a London solicitor, who will have the will. I could probably find out if it's important."

"It's just that I find he had a strong-box in a local bank."

That will have to be opened by the executors. The manager was very sticky about it. Even your name didn't move him."

"Oh. I'll try to find out. Anything else?"

"I don't think so. When do you expect Lady Penge to return?"

"I hope, since you will be able to clear this thing up for us tomorrow, she will be able to come back then, at least for a time."

It was still light when Carolus left Lord Penge and went up to his room. He pushed up one of the heavy windows, as though he found the atmosphere of the house unbearable. It was a chilly evening, and although no rain was falling there was a clouded sky.

Glancing over the landscape, which had become familiar to him in these few days, Carolus noticed something unusual. Smoke was rising from one of the chimneys in the stables. He remembered hearing that Spotter had formerly occupied rooms there, but they certainly had not had a fire in them during his stay. He decided to walk across. In a case like this anything unprecedented might be interesting.

Spotter was nowhere to be seen, so Carolus sat on a truss of hay and waited. He could see a little staircase leading upwards and presumed this went to the living-rooms. After a while the door at the head of this staircase began to open very slowly. Carolus realized that he would not be immediately visible to anyone who might emerge.

It was a couple of minutes before he saw that this was Spotter. The little man must have stood in the doorway listening before he began to descend. Doubtless he had seen the approach of Carolus from the window.

Spotter gave a start when he saw Carolus, but recovered himself to say good evening.

"I didn't know you lived above the stables," said Carolus chattily.

"I don't do nothing of the sort."

"Isn't that the way to the living-rooms?"

"Not for anyone to live there, it isn't. They're shut up and no one don't go near them, not even none of the family."

"I see. I thought perhaps as a fire had been lit . . ."

"Can't leave nowhere to rot and damp. Never do not to light a bit of a fire now and again."

"Are the rooms furnished?"

"Not to say furnished, they're not. Not what anyone means by furnished. Not likely to be, neither."

There was a ring from the telephone. The irregular sound told Carolus that it was a call from the house, not an outside call.

"Yes, Miss," said Spotter. Carolus thought it was the first affirmative he had heard from the groom. The other word was indicative, too, for it could only be addressed to Hermione. "I will. Yes. Certainly. Quite sure. Thank you, Miss."

He looked at Carolus rather furtively.

"Not wanting nothing in the way of a horse tomorrow, were you, sir?"

"I'm afraid not. I've got a lot of work to do."

"No more than what I have, you haven't," said Spotter meaningly. But his good night to Carolus was civil enough.

When he returned to the house, Carolus was so alive to the atmosphere of dark menace that he did not want to leave the hall, which was the centre and hub of the whole house. He asked for a drink and went once again to the fireside. It was nearly seven o'clock.

He amused himself as he looked into the flames by guessing the whereabouts and occupation of all the persons who seemed connected with the case if they were conforming to their stated habits. Lord Penge was still in the library, and Chilham, having just taken his sherry and medicine down, had returned to Mrs Murdoe's room for another hour's bezique before serving cocktails at eight. Piggott would be over in Gribbley's flat, where the two friends were having a drink and doubtless discussing Piggott's sudden dismissal.

Hermione was grooming her dogs, and Lady Penge, presumably, over at Godalming with her cousin's daughter. Lockyer and Ron were in the schoolroom, and Spotter, whom Carolus had just left in the stables, might still be there or hurrying home to his wife. Mrs Carker was at home 'saying to herself', and the cook was preparing dinner. The Worsdykes were in that comfortable living-room at Eastbourne enjoying a—doubtless—efficiently cooked evening meal. Trumper would surely have taken up his position at the bar and be leering at Pam. But Mrs Spotter—what might Mrs Spotter *not* be doing? And the German girl with Wilpey? And the other German girl? These were conjectures it would perhaps be kinder not to make.

That left only Eustace. About Eustace, Carolus could not even make a guess. And he knew that none of the others were certainties.

A clock struck seven: the hour at which Ratchett was supposed to have been shot; the hour of Hermione's vision at the window.

As he remembered this, Hermione came hurriedly from the morning-room. Seeing Carolus, she stopped.

"I've seen it again," she said. "The face at the window."

Carolus made no answer and did not move.

"Aren't you going to *do* something? I said I've seen that face again staring in at the morning-room window!"

"That's a matter for the police, not for me."

Hermione snatched up the telephone.

"Chilham! Send anyone you can to fetch both the plain-clothes men who are on duty. There's something I must report to them at once. As quickly as possible, please."

Carolus stood up slowly.

"You're very calm about it!" said Hermione resentfully.

"Yes," said Carolus. "I'm going out."

"Where are you going?"

"To the stables."

"No . . ."

It was an involuntary sound—scarcely more than the letter n. It was plain that Hermione was in a state of great distress.

Carolus did not wait for the two policemen to be found, but walked across to the stables. The clocks had not yet been put forward for summer-time and this evening seemed rather dark. He did not, however, switch on the light in the stable, but moved into the corner where he had sat that afternoon waiting for Spotter. He could watch the half-door easily—it was light enough outside to recognize anyone.

Yet when at last a man's head and shoulders were framed in the half-door Carolus did not recognize him at all; indeed, he was certain he had never seen him before. The man did not wait to look round or switch on the light; he hurried across to the little staircase and passed into the room at its head.

Carolus returned to the house. He did not join the group in the hall, but went straight up to his room. Looking across to the stables again, he could see no light in the upper windows, but decided that they probably had black-out curtains over them.

He delayed going down to the hall as long as possible, but at eight-fifteen felt bound to go. He found Lord Penge, Eustace, Ronald and Lockyer. It was not until five minutes later that Hermione joined them.

Then a thing happened which might be thought trivial, yet in that place, at that time, from the person involved, seemed highly dramatic and disturbing. Chilham handed Hermione a drink, and as she took it, Chilham dropped his tray. There was nothing on it but an empty glass, and Chilham recovered it swiftly, yet the little incident seemed to startle them all. Not, Carolus guessed, for thirty years had such a thing been known to happen to Chilham.

Dinner was eaten with a subdued and tense air, but it was eaten. Only when the port had duly circulated did Lord Penge rise and ask Lockyer to go with him to the

library. Ronald went to bed, leaving Carolus and Eustace alone together.

"I understand you've solved it," said Eustace.

"Yes."

"Then why on earth can't you tell us? What's the idea of keeping us all in anxiety till tomorrow?"

"I think you will be glad afterwards that I did so. It's not just a piece of mystification."

"My father says you tell him he's perfectly safe tonight."

"That is not what I said. I said I did not believe anyone would attack him in the house."

"But if he were to go outside?"

"You surely would not let him."

"He's most unlikely to wish to do so. Since this thing started he has not left the house at night."

"Except once."

Eustace looked up sharply and stared at Carolus for a moment but did not reply to this. Instead he said thoughtfully, "I wonder why you draw this distinction between in the house and outside. It wouldn't be impossible for someone to break in, you know."

"With a police patrol on all night? I think so."

"At least you don't seem to be very worried about it."

Carolus turned and looked straight at Eustace.

"Don't be deceived by appearances," he said. "I am deeply worried. I have been put in a situation which for any man would be difficult, and for me is almost intolerable. I have had to make a decision affecting a number of human lives, and all I have to guide me is the sense of justice of a very ordinary man. I may be doing wrong and I may be blinding myself to certain dangers. But whatever the truth, I can do no more. I've made my decision for good or ill, and I must abide by it. I'm sorry if I seem cryptic. I promise you I long to get rid of the knowledge I have as much as you long to share it. Now, if you don't mind, I want to see Detective Inspector Scudd. I understand he's coming up to see your father at ten o'clock."



"Yes. I'll ask Chilham."

When the butler appeared he said that Scudd was expected at any moment.

"Could I see him as soon as he comes?" asked Carolus. "I'm anxious to get to bed."

Five minutes later Carolus faced Scudd in the hall.

"Look here, Inspector, I know you resent my being here, and I can quite understand that an amateur is a pain in the neck to the police. But there's something we really ought to discuss."

"I can think of nothing, Mr Deene. As you say, we have no use for amateurs."

"It just happens, Inspector, that I have chanced on something which is valuable to us both. I want to make a bargain with you."

"That would be out of the question. This is not the sort of affair in which one can make bargains."

"At least let me put it to you. Suppose I tell you that I know of certain papers which would be of the greatest use to you in clearing up this case . . ."

"It would be your duty to inform us immediately."

"It would. But I'm not going to do my duty unless you'll play. I'm not asking for anything unreasonable."

"What is it you want?"

"First that you undertake to keep this conversation between us a secret, at least until tomorrow, whichever way you decide to act."

"I can't even do that. It's my duty to tell the men I'm working with that you claim to have this knowledge."

"All right. But you will tell no one else? No one connected with the case?"

"Certainly not. I shouldn't think of doing so in any case."

"Secondly—and this is what you would like—if I give you the information now, tell you exactly where these papers are and they turn out to be relevant, will you allow me to examine them?"

"How can I, Mr Deene? It would be against all rules."

"That I know. But the situation is a most unusual one. Without my information you will never know of these papers and never see them. I assure you they are vital."

Scudd considered.

"You would have to reveal the matter, Mr Deene."

"I assure you that nothing would make me do so. I should deny all knowledge of the thing and swear that this conversation had never taken place. Now look; I tell you that the papers are some distance away and that I must lead you to the place. We can go in my car or yours, whichever you like. On the way back we stop for a moment, I look through the papers, and that is all. It's a fair bargain, I think."

"What I don't understand," said Scudd, who seemed to be weakening a little, "is why when you know where these papers are you don't just go and get them for yourself and say nothing to me about it."

"You will understand that when we clinch our bargain."

"All right, Mr Deene. You win."

"I have your word?"

"You have."

"Then we go tomorrow morning?"

"It's a bet. But if this is some wild-goose chase of yours with nothing at the end of it . . ."

"You would only have lost an hour's time. Good night, Inspector. See you in the morning."

ALONE in his room Carolus felt no relief from the oppression and foreboding of the evening. The great house seemed unnaturally still, but when he opened his window he saw it was a night of darkness and rain, though the wind seemed to have dropped. He stayed at the window for some time, but could see very little of his surroundings, and the night was almost noiseless.

Anyone watching Carolus might have thought him what in one sense he was, a schoolmaster on holiday staying with a hospitable family and now going to bed after a rather tiring evening. No one would have guessed that he had spent days in murky investigation into a baffling murder and found the truth, or that this was the eve of its revelation. Tomorrow some human being would be shown as a murderer, tomorrow the balloon would go up. Yet Carolus stared into the darkness, then returned to his bedside with what appeared to be a calm, even a cheerful deliberation.

But sleep was impossible. He picked up the book he had brought up from the library, Cousens's *Architectural Antiquities of Western India*, and was soon back among the rock-cut shrines and monasteries, the bizarre and beautiful temples, the lavish and sensuous carving of a civilization which would make today's look like a tawdry fair-ground. He had the gift of leaving the present and returning to the past in more than imagination, in spirit and mind entirely. He wanted to forget the people in the case he had been investigating, forget all he had observed of their behaviour and characters, forget the crime itself and the tension that had gripped them all tonight. The hours began to pass, and Carolus scarcely left his contemplation of frescoes and

carved pillars and dancing gods and conquered devils.

Midnight came and still the night was silent. Carolus wondered whether he could sleep a little. Then he heard a sound which, for effect, should have been that of a ghost, so sad and memorable a ghost would it have suggested. It was the heart-breaking sound of a woman crying as she walked, crying with such abandonment that she did not care who heard. The passage was heavily carpeted, but her progress could be followed by the sound of her crying. She came from the top of the stairs, passed the door of Carolus's room and went out of earshot without opening a door. Carolus looked at his watch. It was half-past twelve.

Carolus did not return to the antiquities of Western India, but he did not sleep. He lay on his back with his head in his hands staring at the ceiling.

That was why, perhaps, he heard the footsteps, for they could scarcely have awakened him. His watch told him that it was exactly five to one. The footsteps passed under his window: the jumbled footsteps of two walkers who are side by side but not in step. They crunched on the gravel. Whoever the passers-by might be, they were neither dawdling nor hurrying.

Carolus went to the window and looked down, but the night was too dark. He could not even see anyone moving below. There was only the sound of those footsteps on the wet gravel, fading away in the direction of the other wing of the house.

Carolus made no attempt to follow. Indeed, it was with something that sounded like a sigh of relief that he settled at last in bed and extinguished his light.

Not a quarter of an hour later he was disturbed more peremptorily by a knock at his door. Without hesitation he called, "Come in."

Ronald entered. He was fully dressed and looked confused and unhappy.

"May I speak to you for a minute?"

"Of course."

"I don't know why I thought I had better tell you this. I told you about . . . the other thing. It somehow seemed this was something you ought to know."

"What's it about?"

"Lockyer. He has disappeared."

"You mean?"

"Well, gone. Gone away. But so suddenly that it's odd."

"When was this?"

"About a quarter of an hour ago. He came to my room and said that he was going away for a few days. His bags were all packed."

"Did he say why?"

"No. He seemed upset about something. I asked him what was the matter, and he said, 'Nothing', but I could see there was. He looked . . . I thought he looked scared."

"How was he going?"

"He has a car."

"Where does he keep it?"

"In the garage here."

"Do you know if he has taken it?"

"Yes. I can see the garages from my window, and I saw his lights as he drove away. I doubt if you would hear it from here."

"Does your father know?"

"I asked Lockyer that. He said, 'Of course'. Then I asked him about my studies, and he looked at me as though he didn't know what I was talking about. Then he said, 'Oh hell, just go on with everything'. He seemed in an itch to get away."

"Did he say where he was going?"

"Not a word. I asked him, too. He said, 'Oh, just away'. It is rather extraordinary, isn't it? This was after midnight. Where could he be going at this time?"

"Perhaps," said Carolus dubiously, "he spoke the truth to you. He wasn't being funny. Perhaps he was just going away without any clear plan."

"He usually never moves without a plan. Besides, I think

he did know where he was going and it was somewhere my father was sending him, because just before he left he remembered that he hadn't got 'the key of the house' and went back to Father for it."

"That does look as though he had a destination in mind, I must say. Anyway, thanks for telling me. I think you ought to run along and get some sleep now."

"All right, Mr Decne," said Ronald cheerfully. "See you in the morning."

At last Carolus slept.

He was awakened in the morning by Chilham with his morning tea. It was eight o'clock, and there was sunlight in the room.

"His Lordship is absent, sir," said Chilham.

Carolus sat up in bed.

"Absent? What do you mean? Out of his room? Out of the house?"

"Out of the house, sir. His bed has not been slept in. His overcoat is missing."

At that moment Eustace hurried in.

"Where's my father?" he almost shouted at Carolus. His hair was tumbled and he looked as though he had not slept.

"I understand from Chilham that he is out of the house."

Carolus said this quietly, but with enough meaning to remind Eustace of what he had said last night.

Eustace stood still for a moment, staring at Carolus, then bolted from the room.

Chilham had remained there.

"Mr Lockyer also is absent."

"I knew that, Chilham. He apparently went off in his car at about one o'clock. Tell me, where is Piggott?"

"Piggott took the truck out unusually early this morning. He has not yet returned."

"Can you phone the farm from which he brings supplies, Chilham?"

"Yes."

"Will you please do so at once and let me know the result? Ask what time Piggott called."

Carolus began to dress rapidly, even sacrificing to speed one of the primary pleasures of his day, his morning bath. When Chilham returned, Carolus was fully if carelessly dressed.

"A very extraordinary thing, sir. Piggott has not called at the farm this morning. He left here over an hour ago."

"Has that ever happened before?"

"Never, sir. There have been mornings when the family was away when he has not had to go over, or at any rate so early, but never once has he set out and not brought back the supplies. It is most extraordinary. Piggott is a very reliable man."

"Lord Penge sacked him yesterday."

Chilham gaped.

"Are you quite sure? His Lordship thought a great deal of Piggott."

"Piggott told me they had a violent scene and he was sacked."

"Most surprising. I scarcely know what to think about all this."

"Tell me another thing, Chilham. Has Lord Penge ever left the house like this without notice?"

"Not since I have been here, sir."

"Will you get the valet to examine his clothes and things? Let me know if anything is missing. I have to run down to the lodge for a minute to make an enquiry. Tell me when I come back."

Carolus hurried across to the garage for his car, which Gribbley had put out in the yard. He did not see the chauffeur as he drove away. In a few minutes he was at Mrs Carker's door.

"Tell me," he said before her volubility could be released, "did anyone drive out through these gates during the night?"

"Well, there it is, they've all got their keys of the gates,

so I'm not to know one way or the other. But I did happen to see Mr Lockyer going off. Somewhere round one o'clock I should say it was, though I didn't look at the clock."

"You saw Lockyer himself?"

"Yes. I heard a car stop and just peeped out, if you know what I mean, to see who it might be. He'd jumped out to open the gates with his headlights on, so I could see him as plain as if it was daylight. When he'd gone through he came back and shut the gates and was off, as you might say."

"You couldn't see if there was anyone in the car with him, of course?"

"No. Well, it wasn't to be expected on a dark night like that. What I mean to say, I could only see him because he was in his headlights. Why, has anyone gone in the night?"

"Lord Penge is not in the house."

"There! Well, it never rains but it pours. I wonder wherever he can have got to? You don't think anything can have happened to him, do you?"

"It's not known yet. What other cars passed through?"

"Nothing that I know of till that Piggott came driving down in the truck this morning. I said to myself, 'There, he's early today,' I said. I don't know of anyone else."

"Is the West gate locked at night?"

"Yes, but they don't have keys to that. None of them. The new lock's only just been put on, with all this to-do about his Lordship, and only the police have the keys. Even She hasn't."

The pronoun, which was spoken in capitals, could only refer, Carolus knew, to Mrs Spotter.

Gribbley was in the garage yard.

"Did you see Piggott this morning?" Carolus asked him.

"No. I haven't seen him to speak to since before dinner last night. He went off early this morning."

"He did not call at the farm, it appears."



"So Chilham just told me. I can't understand it. I know he was under a month's notice, but he told me yesterday evening that he thought that would all blow over. He doesn't really want to leave here, and he said he thought Lord Penge would forget it after a few days. They always got on well together before this happened."

"Can you think of any possible explanation for his absence, Gribbley?"

"I can't. I've been trying to think. If it had been anything out of the way he was certain to have told me. I simply can't understand it. I thought it might be a breakdown, but I've just driven over to the farm to see. Not a sign of him."

"Lord Penge cannot drive a car?"

"No."

"Are you quite sure of that?"

"Absolutely. He didn't know a gear-lever from a starting-handle."

"You don't think it's possible that he just didn't like driving and always left it to you?"

"No. I should have known. You can't drive someone about for years without knowing that."

"If you can think where Piggott might be let me know at once, will you? For his own sake, I mean."

"Yes. All right. I expect him back any minute, wherever he's gone."

"I hope you're right."

Carolus was met in the hall by Eustace, who was dressed now, but looked distraught.

"Mr Deene, there's something I must tell you at once. Could you come with me?"

Carolus followed him to a door at the back of the house which was locked. Eustace pulled a key from his pocket and as he inserted it Carolus saw that his hand trembled.

"The gun-room," Eustace muttered.

The gun-room, like most things at Highcastle Manor, was a little too perfect. The lines of sporting guns looked im-

pressively clean. There was a gap in the line towards which Eustace pointed.

"My father's Savage 30·30 is missing," he said.

"How did you come to discover that?"

Eustace did not seem to like the question.

"I came to look. I can't treat this thing as lightly as you do. I'm afraid something has happened to my father. I had a sort of presentiment."

"This was the first place you came to, then? You came here before making any search elsewhere?"

"Yes. Ratchett was killed with a gun exactly similar to the one missing from here. Mr Deene, tell me frankly, do you think my father is dead?"

Carolus looked the young man squarely in the eyes.

"I think it is possible," he said. "I suggest at any rate that you organize a search of the house, the outbuildings and the grounds. More particularly the outbuildings and grounds."

"You mean . . ."

"I think they should be searched."

Eustace recovered himself a little and said, "I suppose the Detective Inspector will see to that. He's coming up at once."

"He probably will. There is no reason why you and the staff should not begin. But of course it's for you to decide."

Going to the dining-room for a hurried cup of coffee, Carolus discovered that events had at last broken the resolve of the family to masticate their way through every crisis. Only Ronald was at the table.

"I'm not awfully worried about my father," he said to Carolus. "I'm sure he went with Lockyer. It's obvious, isn't it? That must have been the reason why Lockyer went off in a hurry—to take my father somewhere."

This reminded Carolus of his request to Chilham, and he turned to the butler now and asked him to send Wilpey to him.

The valet, when he arrived, looked scared.

"Have you examined Lord Penge's things?" asked Carolus.

"Yes, sir. So far as I can see there's nothing missing. Only the clothes he was wearing last night and his overcoat and hat."

"He was wearing a dinner-jacket."

"Yes. That's what's missing. Nothing's out of place in his room. He surely wouldn't have gone away wearing a dinner-jacket, would he? I mean, without taking anything else with him?"

"Unless he meant to return at once."

Carolus found Mrs Murdoo waiting in the hall.

"Her Ladyship has just phoned," she said. "She is on her way back."

"Why?"

"She phoned to say that she wasn't really needed and she was coming home."

"Did you tell her that Lord Penge was missing?"

"Yes. She said she would come as soon as possible."

"Do you know where she phoned from?"

"I presumed Godalming. That's where her niece lived. That's about sixty miles away, but Lady Penge drives rather fast."

"Thank you, Mrs Murdoo. Has Hermione come down yet?"

"Yes. I'm afraid she is terribly upset. She's in the morning-room, if you want to see her."

"Not at present."

When Inspector Scudd arrived he did as Carolus anticipated, organized an immediate and methodical search of the whole estate. He entirely ignored Carolus, and Carolus himself quite understood this. It was a moment of crisis for the man in charge of the case, and the mere presence of an amateur was annoying. He had brought two men with him, and gave his instructions clearly.

But it was not one of Scudd's men who found the body of

Lord Penge, but Gribbley. He saw it lying at the back of the garage in which Lockyer's car and the farm-truck were kept.

Penge had been shot through the head at close quarters. No weapon was in sight. Within a few moments it was known throughout the household that he had been murdered.

## 15

FROM THE moment the body was discovered, Carolus ceased to have any hand in the direction of the case. There was a great deal of practical work to be done and there were measures to be taken which were quite outside his power or authority, and he was content to leave these to the police. He would, in fact, have moved down to the Duke of Suffolk Hotel had not Lady Penge, on her arrival that morning, insisted on his doing nothing of the sort.

She rather shocked both the household and the investigating police by the cool and business-like way in which she heard of her husband's death.

"Murder, you say?" she said to Scudd. "Where's the weapon?"

"It hasn't been found, but a rifle similar to the one that killed Ratchett is missing from the gun-room."

"That's it, then. Somebody took it during the night and shot him. But how did the murderer persuade him to leave the house and go out to the garage so conveniently? He was actually shot in the garage, you say, not taken there afterwards?"

"No. He was shot there. We shan't get a report from the ballistics people for some days, but there can be little doubt. The bullet was embedded in the wall behind him."

"You think he was killed by the killer of Ratchett?" asked Lady Penge.

"It is too early to say. I couldn't give any opinion on that," said Scudd importantly.

"What about you, Mr Deene?"

"Oh yes," said Carolus off-handedly. "Of course he was."

It was then that Carolus suggested to Lady Penge that he should move to the Duke of Suffolk.

"Your family naturally feels that I have been remiss," said Carolus, "that I could have prevented this. I think it would be better if I stayed in the village."

"Nonsense, Mr Deene. I should like you to be here. I think we understand one another better than might be supposed."

"Perhaps we do, Lady Penge. But you understand that in no circumstances can I be a party to any kind of misdirection of justice. I'm sorry if I sound priggish, but I have no alternative, really."

"I see that. I shan't ask you to lie. But surely you ought to be here to see what the police are up to?"

"Thank you for letting me stay."

It was not easy, as a matter of fact, for Carolus to learn what the police were up to. The position in which Lord Penge's body was found suggested that he had stood with his back to the wall, almost as though he faced a firing-squad. The single shot which had killed him had been fired at very close range and death would have been instantaneous. As usual, the exact time of expiry was hard to fix, but it had been somewhere in the small hours. The fact which the police took most seriously was that the drivers of the two cars here were missing.

Their longest cross-examination was naturally of Gribbley. As he told Carolus afterwards, he thought they would never finish with him. They concentrated on the shot—he must have heard it, they said: his flat was not twenty paces away. No, he had heard nothing. He was a heavy sleeper, but a shot fired in the small hours would awaken him, of course. He was positive. Yes, he had been in his flat all night. No, he had never left it for an instant. No, no one had telephoned during the night.

"Didn't it occur to them," suggested Carolus when Gribbley told him this, "that there may have been a silencer on the rifle?"

It must have done in the end, thought Gribbley, because they did eventually leave him alone and start on some of the others.

Lord Penge had still been wearing a dinner-jacket when he was shot and an overcoat over it. Carolus gathered that there was no indication of exactly how he had been standing or where his hands were (except that he had his back to the wall), but, remembering Ratchett's death, Carolus was not much perturbed by the absence of evidence on this point. He remembered that in the case of Ratchett accounts had been rather at variance, Ronald saying that just before he was shot Ratchett had his hands up, and the body when it was discovered showing both hands in the overcoat pockets.

It appeared that little more could be gathered from the dead body, and before noon, after it had been photographed, it was removed. Carolus guessed that the police were concentrating on finding the weapon and questioning Piggott and Lockyer when the whereabouts of these was known.

If Carolus had been surprised at the family's behaviour immediately after the death of Ratchett, he was even more amazed at it now. Eustace seemed more angry than anything else. He looked at Carolus with resentment and dislike, but otherwise seemed to behave as normal, going over to the stables for an hour before lunch. Hermione was nowhere to be seen, but young Ronald showed no great grief, and Lady Penge showed nothing at all. It was astonishing that a man who had loved his family and been loved by at least some of them, who had been shot dead a few hours earlier, received so little mourning, at least of a discernible kind. The life of the house went on, lunch was served punctually at one and consisted of a cucumber-cream soup, grilled sole, *blanquette de veau* and roast duckling. Lady Penge spoke of her visit to her relative and explained why she had been able to leave, and although Hermione looked pale and peaked, she said nothing about her father's death.

Could it be that he was wrong, Carolus wondered, and

that these people had hated Penge? Was even Eustace indifferent? If this were so, there was an added sadness in the situation, for there could be no doubt that Penge had cared deeply for his son and heir.

But Carolus found over coffee that, at least so far as he was concerned, this indifference was assumed, for when Chilham had left the room the family rounded on him as though by pre-arrangement.

"Mr Deene," said Lady Penge. "You said this morning that the same man killed Ratchett and my husband."

"I did not say 'man', Lady Penge."

"The same person, then. Do you know who it was?"

"Yes. It's not very puzzling, really. Anyone who knows what I know should see it at once. And I have no secret information at all."

"When are you going to tell us?" said Ronald.

"Never, I think," said Carolus slowly, "unless there is danger of a miscarriage of justice."

"Now what do you mean by that?" asked Lady Penge calmly.

"I mean if the wrong person is blamed, or seriously threatened with blame, I should have to give all the details I know."

"You seem to have great sympathy for the murderer of my father," said Eustace bitterly.

"I have very little sympathy for anyone in this case."

"But do you think the wrong person will be blamed?" asked Hermione anxiously.

"I'm afraid I think it is quite likely. So many people's actions last night would seem inexplicable to an outside observer."

"What persuaded my father to leave the house, Mr Deene, after your warning to him? Do you know that?"

"Yes, I know that. But I don't think I'll say any more on the subject unless I am forced to do so by circumstances."

When the rest of them had gone, Hermione came to Carolus.



"How much *do* you know?"

"I'm afraid I know it all," said Carolus, "the whole wretched business. There are some parts I have had to fill in with guesswork, but the outline's whole."

"And you say you have no sympathy for anyone? How can you say that?"

She was crying as she left the room.

All that day Scudd was interrogating the people in the house, and he came at last to Carolus. He was sitting at Lord Penge's desk in the library.

"You understand, Mr Deene, that so far as we're concerned you're simply another guest in this house. You realize, I hope, that it would be a serious matter to withhold information from us?"

"What do you want to know?"

The usual questions followed—what time Carolus had gone to bed, had he noticed anything unusual that evening, did he see or hear anything during the night. He answered each question frankly and to the last gave what details he could of the three things that had happened after midnight: the weeping woman, Ronald's report about Lockyer and the footsteps under his window. He thought that Scudd would like to ask him his opinion in the matter, but refrained, perhaps for pride's sake.

"Do you still want me to consider this matter of hidden papers?" Scudd asked.

"The papers aren't hidden, exactly. I certainly want to see them still."

"They have not become irrelevant?"

"Oh no. I think they are more to the point than before. From them I think you may gather who killed Lord Penge."

"Something you know already?"

"One can't have too much confirmation, though, can one?"

"We must see what we can do when we're not too busy. Can't possibly go flying off today."

Detective Inspector Scudd was in fact heavily occupied

with matters which he considered far more important than the mysterious 'papers' Carolus had mentioned. He had finger-print experts at work, still more persons to interrogate, prints and photos to study, reports to read from various parts of the country, messages to send, superior officers to reassure, the Press to interview; it was small wonder that he had not much time to wonder who killed Lord Penge, and certainly none to spare for a drive to an uncertain destination with Carolus Deene.

When the evening newspapers came out Detective Inspector Scudd found himself famous, but he did not altogether like some of the references to 'previous warnings' and the fact that Lord Penge was stated to have been under police protection when he was killed. Nor did he like the allusion in one paper to the presence in the house of the famous private investigator Carolus Deene, 'who, it is understood, will shortly give an exposition of the whole case'.

Carolus liked the evening paper less, for from it he learnt for the first time that Piggott had been found and was being interrogated. It appeared that the truck had been seen outside Piggott's home in Brighton and that a Savage 30.30 rifle from which a shot had recently been fired was still in Piggott's possession.

Carolus went with this news to Gribbley.

"Nobody seriously thinks it's Piggott, do they?" he said at once. "They must be crazy if they do. He'd never think of such a thing. Besides, what would he have to gain?"

"I suppose we shall hear in good time," said Carolus, "why he went off like that and was found in Brighton."

"Of course we shall. There must have been some reason. Piggott liked a laugh and that, but he wasn't a lad to go chasing off without some good reason."

"Then how did he come to have the rifle, do you suppose?"

"Somebody must have planted it on him. Whoever shot the old man, I suppose."

"So far all we know is that they've questioned Piggott. They've questioned everyone here, too. But I don't like that rifle being found with him."

"No. But there can't be anything against young Piggott. I've known him for years, in the *Andrew* and out. He's straight as a die. His old mum will be pretty upset when she reads this, though. She's Getting On and thinks the world of him. However, I suppose it will soon clear up."

"Now that they've all finished with the place, would you mind showing me just how and where you found Lord Penge?"

"Certainly I will. Come over to the little garage."

They went over to the smaller of the garage buildings. Carolus remembered seeing Piggott the other day very skilfully and swiftly back his truck into this, then come over grinning to join him and Gribbley. They entered now to find it completely empty.

"You see, there was just room for the two in here, and for over a year now Lockyer had kept his Rover there and the truck was kept here. When I was told to search this morning, I thought it dam' silly to search the garages at all, but I did what I was told and looked all through the big garage and all the cars in it, then came over here. I saw it at once, of course. The old man was on the ground back there, between where the two cars stood. He was sort of slumped over, but I understand the policesay he must have been facing this way towards the door and been shot from quite close."

"Mm. I notice there's no electric light in this garage."

"No. It had been ordered, but the local electrician's pretty slow. This is the only building on the whole estate that hasn't got it."

"These doors are normally kept open or shut?"

"Shut at night. Piggott used to open them up to get the truck out in the morning. But they weren't locked."

"If Lockyer took his car out before Piggott took the truck, as all our information suggests, he might have left them open or shut after him?"

"That's so."

"We shan't know that till we see Piggott."

"I hope to God that's soon. This is getting on my nerves. Fancy their interrogating a decent lad like Piggott. What the hell next?"

"So long as it's only interrogation," said Carolus.

"You mean, you think they may *charge* him?"

"It's possible."

"With murder?"

"I think you should be prepared for it. So Lord Penge lay just here. Can you suggest anything that might have brought him to this garage?"

"I can't. I don't suppose he has set foot in it for years. He had no reason to. Now tell me what you think the police will do with Piggott."

"They can't hold him much longer without bringing a charge, but of course they may hold him by just charging him with stealing the truck or something till they decide what they intend to do."

"It's a rotten turn-out, the whole thing."

"I agree with you. Now I want to take my car out for an hour."

Carolus drove straight to the Duke of Suffolk and went to the manager's office, where he found Major Stour.

"Dreadful business this," said the Major. "Worse to think the police knew Penge had someone gunning for him and couldn't prevent it."

He said 'the police', but Carolus felt himself included in the condemnation.

"Yes," he said curtly. "Where's Tramper?"

"Gone," said Major Stour. "Fellow came in about six yesterday afternoon and paid his bill for everything owing since Saturday, then went upstairs and packed his bag."

"What time did he actually leave the hotel?"

"Bit hard to say. Fellow went to the public bar. My barmaid wouldn't have him in the lounge. She's a very decent young woman and wouldn't stand for Tramper."

The barman in the public bar remembers him coming in and having a game of darts, but can't remember when he left. He had his bag with him there."

"He had no car?"

"Car? No. All he had was one suit-case."

"Surely there must be some idea when he left? Was he still there at closing time, for instance?"

"No, no. It was before then. Between eight and nine, so far as I could gather. He was talking to some lorry-drivers, so he may have got a lift with some of them. No one saw him leave. Why?"

"I'm interested."

"You don't suspect the fellow of . . ."

"I didn't like him."

"Nor did I. But you surely don't think he had anything to do with Penge's death? The police would have been round asking questions today if it was anything like that, I should have thought."

"Perhaps."

"I'm glad to see the back of the fellow, anyway."

"Would you be kind enough to phone me if he reappears?"

"I'll do that. But I hope I never set eyes on him again."

"Don't be too sure that you won't. Good night."

## 16

IT WAS again through the Press that Carolus learnt the latest move of the police. Piggott had been charged with the murder of Lord Penge.

He read the news without comment and went out to find Gribbley. The chauffeur was surly now.

"What are you going to do about it?" he asked Carolus.

"I'm going to see Piggott."

"In the nick?"

"Yes. He'll be at Brixton on remand. Do you think you can arrange for me to visit him in four days' time?"

"I'll try. But what's the reason for all that delay?"

"There's something I must do first."

"Don't hurry yourself, will you?" said Gribbley with angry sarcasm.

"On the contrary, I don't intend to lose any time at all. I'm leaving for Scotland at once."

"Look, Mr Deene, don't be funny, will you? Piggott's my mate, and I'm not in a mood for anyone to be funny."

"I've never felt less like any kind of funniness in my life. I am going to Scotland with a particular purpose."

"Connected with this?"

"Yes. I'm going to Achendouroch."

"The shooting-lodge? I'd like to know what you expect to find out there. It's a God-forsaken place."

"What route do you usually take?"

"London, Nottingham, Leeds, Carlisle, Stirling. That's my way, though you'll find plenty to argue about it."

"From there?"

"Inverness and Dornoch. That's about the end of civilization. From there you keep along the coastal road as

far as Helmsdale, where you fork left. Carry on for about twenty miles till you come to Auchintoul. From there you leave anything that you might call real life. You turn sharp right by a queer sort of a road through the mountains for about ten miles, till you're half way from Auchintoul to Governisgeach. You'll find the shooting-lodge on its own there, the only building for miles."

"What's the total distance?"

"From here? About six hundred and eighty miles. If you make it by lunchtime tomorrow you'll have done well."

Carolus thought so, too, as his car streaked across the Highlands next morning. He lunched at Dornoch, then set himself to do the last seventy-odd miles.

It had been glorious spring weather till now, but during lunch there started a sudden downpour of rain, and he drove away through it. He found the turning to the right at Auchintoul and had a curious feeling of fantasy as he sped eastwards. 'You leave anything you might call real life,' Gribbley had said, and Carolus agreed with him. This road, which no one seemed to use, threading its white metalled way across the hills was like a road across space. For mile after mile it went without a sign of human habitation. There was not even a sheep. He felt he was driving away from life, leaving behind the sordid intrigues, the cruelty, the meanness of the car he was investigating and finding a new clear atmosphere. The rain continued to pour down, and when he was approaching, as he hoped, the spot indicated by Gribbley he drove slowly, looking for any house that might be the shooting-lodge.

What he found was a track, even narrower and rougher than the road he was following, which led off to the right. At the fork was notice-board *Achendouroch*, but no sign of a house. He followed this track for a slippery mile, and at last saw the place he was looking for. It was past three when he eventually pulled up in front of the fresh-looking, pleasantly proportioned house.

Immediately the front door opened and Lockyer hurried

out. Carolus watched narrowly, and saw the tutor look in the car before speaking.

"Have you come alone?" he asked, without the civility of a greeting.

"Yes," said Carolus.

"Why? Why have you come?"

The rain was pouring down on Lockyer as he shouted through the car window.

"Wouldn't it be better to discuss that in the house?" suggested Carolus mildly.

"Yes. Come in. Come in."

Lockyer bolted across to the front door, and Carolus followed him. He was relieved to see a fire burning in the grate of a comfortable room with big chintz-covered arm-chairs.

"Where is Lord Penge?" asked Lockyer.

Carolus watched his face.

"Dead," he replied.

There was a short silence.

Then Carolus went on: "He was found shot through the head. He was on the floor of the garage in which you kept your car."

"When?"

"The day before yesterday. In the morning."

Carolus said no more, but watched Lockyer. The man seemed stunned, but Carolus had never thought him stupid or incapable of dissimulation.

"You . . . mean this? It's true, isn't it? I can scarcely . . ."

Carolus handed him one of the newspapers he had brought in from the car.

Lockyer's next shock was the news of Piggott's arrest.

"Piggott arrested! Why Piggott?"

"Obviously because the police think he did it. But they found him immediately. They haven't found you yet."

"Me? What have I got to do with it?"

"That's a question which you will have to answer quite



a number of times, I think. Suppose you start now. How do you come to be up here?"

"How did you know I was?" countered Lockyer.

"I didn't know for certain. But when you saw Ronald you had to go back to Lord Penge because you had forgotten the key of the house. What house could that have been except this place?"

"I see."

"Besides, I don't under-rate you. I don't think you're such a fool that you imagine you could hide long in England if the police wanted to see you. You had to be somewhere where you didn't know they wanted you. Somewhere where you wouldn't see a paper. You still haven't told me what brought you here?"

"Penge, of course. He took me along to the library that evening and gave me my instructions. For the first time I thought he was really jittery. He said he was going to get away from Highcastle, away from the family and everyone, and come here. No one was to know where he would be."

"Except you?"

"That's right."

"Why you?"

"I don't know. He trusted me, I suppose."

"More than his son, for instance?"

"Apparently."

"It doesn't sound very probable, does it?"

"That's what he said, anyway."

"If that was so, why didn't he go with you at once?"

"I asked him that. In fact I tried to persuade him. You were to blame for that. You had told him he was safe that night."

"I had told him nothing of the sort. But go on."

"He said he would leave next morning."

"How? By car?"

"I don't know. He didn't say. He just told me that he was tired of living under a threat. He was coming up here, where it wouldn't be hanging over him."

Lockyer thought for a moment, then turned rather aggressively to Carolus.

"He said you knew who had sent those letters and who had shot Ratchett."

"He was quite right."

"Then why the hell didn't you have him arrested? The old man would be alive now."

"And you wouldn't be wanted by the police."

"I? Don't talk nonsense! What do they want me for?"

"According to the usual official verbiage, they 'think you could assist them in their enquiries'."

"How? I wasn't there."

"They can't fix the time of death to a minute. Your time of departure from Highcastle comes well within the range of time during which the murder could have been committed. In other words, you have no alibi. Added to that there is what appears to have been a flight. That doesn't look well."

"But it wasn't a flight at all. Penge told me to come here and get the place ready for him. There is an old couple permanently in the house, but there are always endless preparations necessary for a stay here."

"I should think so. Well, it's not a bad story. I haven't heard Piggott's yet. His departure looked like flight, too. But he was unlucky. The gun was with him."

"The gun which had killed Penge? Then surely there's no question?"

"There's a great deal. The gun could have been planted."

"By whom?"

"You, for instance."

"Damn you, I tell you . . ."

"It's not I who has to be convinced."

"I see now I ought never to have left without Penge. There was no serious reason why he shouldn't have come."

"Can you suggest what can have made him go out to the garage that night?"

"After I had left, you mean?"

"Or before?"

"You don't suggest I persuaded him to come out to the garage, do you?"

"No. I don't think you persuaded him."

"Well, then?"

"Something caused him to go out there. I think he went with you."

"You're wrong."

"You're lying."

Again there was silence. The rain had ceased now. As they sat there a bony woman in a shawl asked from the door if they wanted tea.

"Yes, yes," said Lockyer absently.

After a moment Lockyer sat up and spoke earnestly:

"Look here, Deene, I've never liked you and I resented you hanging about for no reason but curiosity. But I don't think you'd deliberately get anyone into trouble. Tell me, where was Lord Penge when he was shot?"

"In the garage behind the place where your car and the truck usually stood."

"Is that sure? He couldn't have been carried there and dumped?"

"The wall shows where the bullet hit it behind his head."

"Then I'm in a spot, because as a matter of fact he did come out to the garage with me. I couldn't understand it at the time and I don't now. He said he wanted to see me safely away. The car might not start, or some rubbish. When I'd got the car out I offered to go back to the house with him, but he waved me off. I left him standing just in front of the doors of the garage and started my journey."

"And didn't turn back?"

"No. I drove like hell. What does it mean, Deene?"

"You'll have a lot of questions to answer. I heard the two of you pass under my window, and I've already reported it to the police, so it's useless for you to say that you went alone. I didn't see you, of course, but I don't know what other pair it could have been."

"No. I shall tell the police exactly what happened."

"I should certainly do that. Whatever the consequences."

"I suppose I ought to return to Highcastle straight away?"

"I think so. Yes."

"There's a room which was got ready for Penge which you can have tonight if you like. Then we could both start back tomorrow morning."

Carolus paused.

"Thank you," he said at last. "I should like to stay."

The gaunt woman brought tea. Knowing the family penchant for the typical, the traditional, the true-to-type, he half expected her to start talking about Bonny Prince Charlie, or pixies, or Sir Compton Mackenzie, or the island that likes to be visited or something of the sort. She would at least speak Gaelic or in a dialect so obscure that only her husband could understand her. But she brought several tray-loads of viands to a table on the other side of the room, said "There's your tea" and departed without so much as a step of a Highland fling or a gesture to ward off evil spirits.

"She's from Battersea," explained Lockyer. "Her husband is an old crofter, though."

She had evidently absorbed enough of Scottish customs to make the tea-table the place for a quite intimidating display of biscuits, scones, cakes and curious discs containing oatmeal, all of which, Carolus believed, had their own names. There were eggs and jam, fruit and jelly.

"Mrs MacKennageall wants us to make what she calls 'a good tea'," said Lockyer chattily.

But it was Carolus who now appeared sullen, or perhaps only thoughtful. Having asked Lockyer the questions he needed to ask and received his replies, he seemed to want no communication with the man. Left to himself, he went to the bookshelves to see what they had to offer, and for the rest of the evening scarcely looked up from Ferdinand Schevill's *History of Florence from the Founding of the City through the Renaissance*.

On the following morning at six-thirty or so he started southward, and reached Highcastle for lunch on the following day. He told no one he had seen Lockyer or that the tutor was on his way and gave no explanation for his absence.

There was no sensational news here. The case, in fact, seemed to have run into an ominous calm. The family life went on and, except for the absence of Lord Penge, Piggott and Lockyer, very little change was noticeable from that life a week ago. Carolus had already claimed to know the truth and to have posted details of it to an unknown address. The threat in the letters had been fulfilled. It seemed that anything startling now must come from police action.

After lunch he called Chilham aside.

"I'm going over to see your son," he said.

"Is that necessary, sir?"

"Yes, Chilham. Quite necessary, as I think you understand."

"You know his address? I'll write it down for you."

He found young Dr. Chilham alone in his surgery. He was a tall, rather heavily built man with good grey eyes and a firm chin, a man not easily rattled, Carolus decided. He told him his name.

"Oh yes, I know about you. Hang on five minutes, will you, till I finish my surgery time and we can go across to the pub for a drink? I'll certainly tell you anything I can."

Over two pints in a quiet corner of the bar Carolus said, "Perhaps it would save time if I told you what I know already. I know that you and Hermione wanted to become engaged and that Penge was against it. And I know that you were at Highcastle on the night Penge was murdered. That's about all."

"It's quite enough. Yes, I was over there. You see, Hermione couldn't come to visit me here. The district nurse is a bitch and well . . . you know the sort of situation . . ."

"You mean she thinks she ought to be the doctor's wife?"

"Something like that. Anyway, once before she phoned Penge when she saw Hermione's car here. So if we meet at all we have to make it somewhere away from both our homes. But that night I had to see her. I phoned and told her I was coming. She said I should never get into the place because of the police. But I don't suppose you want to know all this?"

"I've got a pretty good idea of it already. You arrived at seven and finally left between twelve and half-past, didn't you?"

"That's it."

"Did you see anyone there besides Hermione and Spotter?"

"I didn't even see Spotter. I certainly didn't see my father or anyone else."

"You left your car in the village and came on foot across the park?"

"Yes."

"And you met no one? No one at all? Please be quite sure of this."

"I am quite sure."

"You haven't the slightest idea who killed Lord Penge?"

"If I had it would be a sheer guess."

"Would it, Doctor Chilham?"

"Certainly."

"Then there is nothing else I need to ask you."

"There's one thing I'd like to ask you, though. Out of curiosity. How did you know I was there that night?"

"That's very simple. I saw you. Does that mean you want to add anything to what you have told me?"

"No. Nothing. Tell me, will Piggott be found guilty?"

"If he's ever before a jury I should think it highly likely."

"You're very cryptic, Mr Deene."

"Yes. I could put it rather more strongly about you. You see, I believe you know who shot Lord Penge."

Dr Chilham shrugged.

"I think this is a rather pointless conversation," he said.

In less than half an hour Carolus was talking to Gribbley.

"Have you arranged my visit to Piggott?"

"Yes. It's for tomorrow. You go as one of his solicitors. Here's the card."

"Have you seen him?" asked Carolus.

"Yes. I've been up. He's quite cheerful. Doesn't seem to take it seriously."

"I think he's making a mistake there."

"He can't believe there can be anyone so bloody silly as to think he did it. He doesn't even believe the police do. He says they must be holding him with some other object. To make someone else talk or something like that."

"Does he? That's interesting."

"Anyway, you'll see tomorrow. Did you find out anything at Achendouroch?"

"Yes. All I needed."

"I wish you'd get a move on. Spill the whole beans and get young Piggott out of there. If you know who it was, you've only got to say, haven't you?"

"It's not as simple as that. I've got to be able to convince not only the people connected with the case but the police as well. But I think when I've seen Piggott I shall be able to do so."

"Hope you do," said Gribbley, and Carolus left him staring sulkily at the polishing leather in his hand. -

DRIVING THROUGH the dreary streets surrounding Brixton Prison next day and remembering the stream of wretched men who came this way daily from the London courts, Carolus found himself wondering at the workings of the official mind, that Robot mechanism which ruled men's lives like a factory clock. In this case, for instance, the police had charged Piggott with the murder of Penge, but no one with the murder of Ratchett. They had pulled the young ex-sailor from his everyday life and thrown him in this gloomy gaol, and it could only be in the sincere belief that he was a murderer. For this belief they obviously had more reason than others knew. A charge of murder was not lightly brought and certainly not, as Piggott had suggested to Gribbley, for any reason other than that it was believed true.

As he passed through the gates and was taken into a grim courtyard, Carolus felt the grey and sickly horror of the place filling his pores like a fog. A few seedy-looking prisoners wearing their own clothes passed him, and the warder who conducted Carolus explained that they were debtors.

"Your man's in the hospital," he added.

"Why? Is he ill?"

• "No. Murder remand. We always keep them in the hospital under observation."

Carolus was shown into a small room on the door of which was painted the word 'Solicitors'. Presuming it meant lawyers and not unfortunate old clergymen brought in from Piccadilly, he entered and waited till Piggott should appear. This took some ten minutes. He was accompanied



by a warder, but Carolus and Piggott were left together, the warder taking up his position outside.

The young man looked cheerful enough, though Carolus thought there was something a little brassy and false in his manner.

"Bastards, aren't they?" he said after an offhand greeting. "Putting anyone in this filthy, stinking place. It's enough to turn you up to see the crowd in here. All the dregs and riff-raff of London, you'd say they were. It's not as though they were criminals, most of them. Just rubbish."

"I gather you're in the hospital?"

"Yes, all us murderers are in there. You've never seen such a collection in your life. Look like respectable church-goers, most of them. Especially the poor bloke they've just brought in for that Chatham job."

"Oh yes. *Why* had the girl no shoes?"

"I haven't got round to asking yet, but I'll find out for you if you're curious. How long do you think they'll keep me here?"

"Until your trial, I suppose. Unless anything happens to convince them you are not guilty."

"Such as?"

"Such as their coming to believe that it was someone else."

"They must. They can't seriously think it was me, can they? What would I want to shoot the old man for?"

"I think you should face the fact that they do think it was you, Piggott. They would not have charged you otherwise for any consideration at all. What's more, they must have good reason to think it. Suppose you tell me how it all happened?"

"Well, I told you about that row I had with the old man? I was a bit worried about it because I didn't really want to leave the job, and anyway he's not a bad old stick. So when he sent for me that evening. . . ."

"What time?"

"I don't know. Late. Past eleven, anyway. I went over,

meaning if I could to put it straight. But I didn't need to. The old man did that himself. 'Oh, Piggott,' he said in his quiet way. 'I think perhaps I was a little hasty today. We are all under a strain.' I said yes, and I'd said more than I meant and was sorry; so he said, very well we'd forget it."

"Was that all?"

"No. This is the funny part. He said he thought I'd better take a day off. We all need a bit of a change. So why didn't I run down to Brighton to my home and he'd let me have the truck for it. 'What about the stuff from the farm?' I asked him, and he said Gribbley could fetch that later in one of the other cars. So I jumped at the chance, naturally.

"Then he said since I was going to Brighton there was something I could do for him. Would I deliver this letter as soon as I arrived? He wanted it there not later than eight in the morning. This meant me getting up about six, but since he was letting me go I agreed to this."

"To whom was the letter addressed?"

"To someone called Gorringer at the Sandringham Private Hotel. I took it and was just going to say good night when the old man said, 'I should prefer that it is not known that you will be absent tomorrow.' So I told him I wouldn't tell anyone. The only other thing he said was something about the gun-room. You see, I was responsible for the gun-room."

"What did he say?"

"Oh, nothing important. Just asked if it was in order and that."

"You had a key of it, of course?"

"Yes. It was always kept locked and it has a barred window."

"Did you go to it that night?"

"As a matter of fact I did. I thought it funny the old man asking about it and wondered if I'd left something out of place. But no. Everything was there and in order."

"You are quite sure of that? I ask because the next

morning Eustace discovered that the Savage 30·30 belonging to Lord Penge was missing."

"It was there all right when I looked in. I checked everything, locked the door and went up to bed, setting my alarm for six o'clock next morning."

"You didn't tell Gribbley you were going?"

"No. He'd have been asleep by the time I went to bed, and anyhow the old man had told me not to say anything. Grib would hear in the morning, I thought, when he was sent to the farm."

"And you spoke to no one else?"

"No. The alarm went off all right and I dressed and went down to the garage for the truck."

"This may be rather important. Were the garage doors shut or open when you reached them?"

"Shut. They're roller doors, as you may have noticed, and take quite a bit of shutting. But they were closed. Lockyer's car was out."

"Did that strike you as strange?"

"Not really. He often used to go off for a week-end or a night. I just noticed it, hopped in the truck and was off."

"How light was it?"

"Dark enough for headlights at first."

"When you had opened the garage doors you entered the garage no more than to get into the driving-seat of the truck?"

"That's right."

"And it had been backed in?"

"Yes."

"Did Lockyer usually run his car in forwards or did he back in like you?"

"Always forwards."

"I see. Go on with what happened that day."

"I ran down to Brighton quite comfortably. It was light when I arrived at my home. Mum was up, and very surprised to see me with the truck. She got me some breakfast and I sat talking to her while she was doing her work. She's

very fussy about the house and takes longer than anyone I know to get it how she likes. Then she had to go out shopping, and I went with her. It was twelve o'clock when we got back and saw the police waiting by the truck.

"Of course mum went right off the deep end and asked what I'd been up to. Then, when they showed me the Savage in the back of the truck and said Lord Penge had been murdered, she calmed down a bit because she knew it couldn't have anything to do with me. That's like mum, ready to tear me to ribbons if I'm in trouble for something I've done, like that time I was adrift from the Navy, but right with me when it's some dam' silly thing like this. However, they only said they wanted to ask me a few questions, and I went down to the station with them.

"Then it began. I soon saw they weren't going to believe that Penge had given me the day off, so I told them about the letter to this character Gorringer. They said they would go and ask him, and then a funny thing happened—they came back and said they had seen him but there hadn't been any letter. It had been too early when I got to this Sandringham Private Hotel to knock anyone up, so I'd dropped it in the letter-box. I told the coppers that, but they only said that Gorringer was quite positive. He had received no letter that morning from Lord Penge. That made it worse for me. Why should he say a thing like that? What sort of man is he? Do you know him?"

"Yes," said Carolus. "I can only say I have never known him to tell a deliberate lie."

"Well, he did this time, and it's dropped me right in trouble. The next thing was the rifle. It appeared it had the silencer on it. They almost laughed when I said I had no idea it was in the back of the truck. They asked if I had seen it before, and I said of course I had. I was in charge of the gun-room, wasn't I? So they said when had I seen it last, and I told them the night before in the gun-room. 'So you admit going to the gun-room last night?' they said, and I told them I had no reason not to admit it.

"Then they told me my finger-prints were on the rifle, and I said, why not? I'd cleaned it the previous day. They said, 'Ah, but this is the rifle used to kill Lord Penge, and there are no other finger-prints on it.' It was no use telling them that whoever had shot him could have worn gloves. I just let them go on.

"They'd heard about my row with the old man and they made the most of that. What I'd said and what I hadn't said. I thought they were never going to let me alone. Then, just when it didn't look as though there was anything more for them to ask me, they began on the other lot, the anonymous letters and Ratchett. Can you believe it? They wanted to put that on me, too!"

"It is generally accepted that both Ratchett and Penge were killed by the same person. I think so myself."

"Yes, but you don't think it's me, for God's sake. Those coppers were sure of it by the time they'd finished. But there wasn't much to base a charge on, so in the end they charged me just with killing Penge. As if that wasn't enough. So what's going to happen?"

Carolus looked at him steadily.

"I am going to explain what actually took place," he said.

Piggott returned his look without evasion.

"The lot?" he asked at last

"The lot."

There was a rather tense silence in the room.

"Will that mean they let me go?"

"You must answer that question for yourself," said Carolus.

"One thing, anyway. Will you see this Gorringer and find out why he lied about that letter I took him?"

"I shall certainly see him."

"And tell old Grib I'm all right, will you? When you see him, I mean."

"I'll do that."

Driving back to Highcastle, Carolus felt no elation at

having obtained, by means somewhat oblique, the information he wanted. More than once during his recent cases he had felt oppressed by his responsibilities. It was no light thing to have this flair for finding out the heart of the matter, and it gave him duties towards people and sometimes made him interfere in a way he detested with the lives of others. It was one thing to investigate a crime and discover the truth about it; it was quite another to find himself against his own will an arbiter who had to decide for himself how to act when his actions might mean death or life to a fellow human being.

Besides, he found the atmosphere at Highcastle Manor an unpleasant one. The way in which the family, either by joint resolution or by a natural tendency to act a part, showed complacency in the face of death, was nothing short of callous. And not only death, but the fate of those about them. Carolus did not believe that any one of them really believed Piggott guilty, yet Gibley seemed the only one in the least concerned with him and the charge against him.

It was somewhat macabre, thought Carolus, to see the whole archaic game go on, the huge meals, the organized service, the obstinate maintenance of an extravagant and out-of-date way of life. The police, the inquest on the head of the household, the arrest of their footman, Carolus himself with his eternal questions, the two funerals, the screaming headlines in sensational newspapers—all these left this collection of people outwardly unmoved. Eustace was the only one who had seemed concerned about the threat to his father, and now Eustace seemed more angry than sorry at his death.

When he reached the East gate he found it standing open for the first time since he had known the place. It seemed that the police considered no more security precautions necessary. But Mrs Carker was at her garden gate, and waved to him energetically to stop. She seemed animated.

"What do you think?" she asked rhetorically. "That Lockyer came back this afternoon and never so much as said

good afternoon as he went driving in. To my way of thinking that's no way for anyone to behave, specially when they're nothing to speak of themselves, as you might say. Then he hadn't been up at the house ten minutes before the police came and took him away for questioning, as well they might. I said to myself when I saw them go, 'I should think they *would* want to ask him questions,' I said, 'what with him popping off like that on the night of the murder and one thing and another. It wouldn't surprise me if it went further than questions, upon my word it wouldn't.' Anyway, they've got him now, and I shouldn't like to say when they let him go, if they don't keep him in altogether, which I wouldn't put past them, things being what they are. I don't care what anyone says, I don't believe it was that Piggott who did it, though I can't say I've ever really taken to him. Still, you wouldn't wish for anything like that, whichever way you look at it. Well, I must be getting on, because my husband will be home in a minute. I shouldn't wonder if that Lockyer had a hand in it that night when I saw him opening the gate as plain as a pikestaff. I said to myself then, 'I don't believe he's up to any good,' I said, and it's turned out I wasn't far wrong, hasn't it? Well, this won't do. I've got my husband's tea to get. It's really dreadful about his Lordship being done for like that, after the murderer telling him he was going to be killed the same as Ratchett was. I couldn't bring myself to believe it when my husband came home full of it the other morning. I said to myself, 'They wouldn't do anything like that to his Lordship, would they? because he's so quiet and nice with everyone,' but there you are . . ."

Carolus seized this momentary pause.

"This won't do," he said with a friendly smile. "I must be getting on."

Before Mrs Carker could reply he let the car glide gently forward.

Lady Penge was in the hall.

"Oh, Mr Deene, I have news for you," she said. "Your

friend Mr Gorringer is coming over tomorrow. He feels he should be present at the inquest."

"I think he should, too. Surprisingly enough, he has some evidence, I believe, which may be valuable."

Lady Penge smiled.

"Gorringer!" she said and chuckled.

Carolus went upstairs to change, and returning just before eight o'clock found Hermione alone. She was rather flushed.

"So you went to see Stanley."

Carolus remembered that Stanley was young Chilham's first name.

"Yes. I think you understand why I had to do so. I knew he was over here that night."

"How did you know?"

"I saw him."

"You're mad if you suspect him of having anything to do with Father's death."

This was said tentatively rather than emphatically, and Carolus did not answer it.

"Anyway," Hermione continued, her manner growing defiant—"anyway, we're engaged now. That ought to show you that neither of us is worried about your suspicions or anyone else's. We should scarcely announce our engagement straight away if we'd had anything to do with my father's death which made it possible."

"A good argument. You certainly haven't wasted any time."

"What's more, we're going to get married as soon as Stanley can get a licence."

"The funeral bak'd meats did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables'."

"Not as bad as that, perhaps, but we've no reason to delay now. We've waited so long, you see, because of Father. Mummy agrees."

"Yes. I understand."

"On the other hand, Mr Deene, I do wish you or the



police or someone would clear all the mystery up before the wedding. It is hateful not to know."

"And awkward, surely, to have one of your servants in prison on a capital charge?"

"Yes, that too. When are you going to tell us everything?"

"You think you will be happier when you know?"

"As long as . . . Yes, of course we shall."

"I'm going to do my best to put everyone out of doubt tomorrow. But I warn you, it's not going to make you very happy."

## 18

MR GORRINGER arrived next morning.

"Ah Deene, Deene," he said so inevitably that Carolus knew the end of the sentence before it was spoken, "this is indeed a tragedy!"

"You and the writers of obituaries seem to be the only people who think so. His family hasn't turned a hair."

"I can scarcely take you seriously. I am sure that Lady Penge is heart-broken. Heart-broken."

"If she is it hasn't spoiled her appetite, I can assure you."

"Ah. The table at Highcastle Manor was always a liberal one. The children are surely suffering under their heavy loss?"

"The eldest son may be. The daughter has already recovered sufficiently to become engaged to a man whom her father forbade her to see. The youngest son has not mentioned it."

"You appal me, Deene. When such a light goes out one would have thought that the family would be blinded with grief."

"It's possible. I only say that they show few signs of it."

"But how could it happen? How was it allowed to happen? There was warning enough, in all conscience. I reproach myself for not having been at hand."

"I don't think you need reproach yourself for that. It would not have made any difference. Penge was warned not only by the anonymous letters, but also by me. I told him he would not be attacked in his house that night."

Mr Gorringer stopped dramatically, for they had been pacing the gravel before the house.

"You don't mean that you actually anticipated something of this sort?"

"Yes. I told you from the first, Headmaster, that this wasn't my case. Mine is, after all, a very limited field. I have a certain facility or a great deal of luck in investigating murder. I cannot act as a bodyguard or a Cassandra."

"I accept that. I may well have been to blame in recommending you so strongly to Lord Penge and in persuading you to come here. I should, mayhap, have realized that your forte lay in other directions, not least, I may say, in the inculcation of history. However, *retourmons à nos moutons*. I understand that there is no mystery about the death of Lord Penge."

"Very little, I think."

"The police have already arrested the brute responsible? The footman, I learn from the newspapers."

"The footman has been charged with murder, yes."

"But no arrest has yet been made in connection with the other little incident?"

"No."

"Perhaps you have some suspicion there?"

"If by 'the other little incident' you mean the very brutal murder of Michael Ratchett, I think the same person killed both."

"Ah. I see your drift. You do not think the police have all the facts? Your deductions may at least throw some new light on the whole tragic sequence of events?"

"I hope so."

"You intend to propound your theory, my dear Deene? If I mistake me not, I foresee one of those gatherings of the persons concerned with which it is your wont to wind up your investigations? But I must put it to you that here such a thing would surely not be in the best of taste. A bereaved family, indeed one may say a bereaved nation, might not be well pleased with such a display of your own virtuosity. Oh, I have no doubt that you would add to our knowledge of events. I have seen enough of your work on

similar occasions to be confident that you would have surprises for us. Your demonstrations have been well enough when less eminent persons were concerned. But do you not think that such a *tour-de-force* would be unseemly in the case of Lord Penge?"

"It is already arranged for this evening."

"I scarcely know what to say. As an old friend of the deceased I cannot but feel that it might show some lack of respect to his memory. On the other hand, I know that you believe such a gathering as you propose to be a *sine qua non* of investigation, a part of the tradition of detection which the greatest masters have not scorned to use. Is it a large muster which you suggest?"

"Pretty large. There are the four members of the family, five of the indoor staff, a chauffeur, a groom and his wife, the wife of one of the gardeners, the tutor Lockyer, a man called Tramper, a Doctor Chilham, a former chauffeur and his wife and I hope the police."

"But not of course the guilty man. He is already under arrest."

"I think I can promise you, Headmaster, that the person largely responsible for the death of Lord Penge will be present."

"Indeed? I cannot . . . but I must not enquire too narrowly before the event. I know that to be against precedent. You have of course sought and obtained the permission of Lady Penge and her elder son?"

"Yes."

"In that case there is little more for me to say. The Press will be excluded?"

"Yes."

"Then I shall lend my presence. At what time did you say?"

"Quite early. About six o'clock. Certain of those who will be there will have . . . journeys to make afterwards."

"You feel no doubts?"

"Not on the main course of the thing. There is still some

evidence that I hope to see this morning. You realize you're a witness, don't you? If Piggott is brought to trial for the murder of Penge, you will be called."

"I have foreseen some such unpleasing prospect since the police called on me in Brighton. It will be a most unwelcome duty. Indeed, were this concerned with the murder of someone less distinguished I should tremble for the good name of the Queen's School, Newminster. But in the case of Lord Penge I feel justified in representing to the Governors that my appearance as a friend of the dead man will in no way be derogatory."

"Tell me, Headmaster, what happened about that letter?"

"You refer, I assume, to a letter from Lord Penge which the accused man claims to have left at my hotel on the morning after the body was discovered?"

"That's it."

"There was no such letter."

A statement so round and curt from Mr Gorringer should have been convincing. But Carolus pressed the matter. '

"I must point out," he said, "that your statement that there was no such letter will be required in evidence just as much as, or more than, one in which you admitted receiving it."

"Deene, I have spoken. There was no such letter."

"Then it must have been picked up by someone else in your hotel."

"That can scarcely be the case. The Sandringham Private Hotel is a small, I might say intimate, establishment. It is my custom to spend a fortnight there with Mrs Gorringer during each successive Easter vacation. In the summer Le Balmoral, Ostende (with days spent in Bruges), in the spring the Sandringham, Brighton. The proprietress, a Mrs Tunney, has become a personal friend of ours, and at this time of the year is assisted only by her two nieces, the Misses Plummer, somewhat plain young women well versed in domestic duties. It chanced that on the day in question

no other guests were in residence. As an *habitué* of the hotel I have certain little privileges and customs, and among others is the daily removal of the post from the letter-box on the front door and its display on the hall table. That morning I did this at eight-thirty on my way to breakfast—that was a full half-hour after the man Piggott claims to have called. I repeat, there was no letter.”

“Who had come down?”

“Only the elder, and I must confess plainer, Miss Plummer, whose turn it was to cook the breakfast. If such a letter had been left it would have been in the box when I emptied it.”

“Piggott is positive he left it there.”

“Piggott is a man on a murder charge. His claims may be said to be neither here nor there.”

“I can’t see how he can have made that up, whatever else he has done.”

“Let us agree that the subject is exhausted,” said Mr Gorringer airily, “and speak of more relevant matters. It would interest me to learn how you discovered what you believe to be the truth in this case. A series of significant clues? Finger-prints? Analysis? Forensic chemistry? The sifting of complicated evidence? By what line of research did you proceed before your efforts were rewarded?”

“Guesswork and instinct, mostly. How else do I ever ‘proceed’, as you put it?”

“You alarm me. Have you nothing but guesswork and instinct to offer in explaining the death of Lord Penge?”

“Of course I have more now. You asked me how I proceeded. The answer is as usual. I used what intuition and imagination I have in making a general review of the case, then investigated in order to decide whether there were or were not facts to back up my suppositions. I think I’m the only investigator who works that way. The others are more logical—they collect their facts, then draw their conclusions from them. I usually flounder about a day or two till I hit on what seems a solution, using, as I say, more intuition

than logic. Then I start testing it. It may have to be discarded, but in this case I was lucky. I was on the target first time."

Carolus saw Inspector Scudd alight from his car and prepared to join him.

"It sounds strangely haphazard," said Mr Gorringer. "You are certain you have the evidence to support it?"

"No, Headmaster. *You* have the evidence to support it," said Carolus, and left Mr Gorringer with mouth ajar.

He found Detective Inspector Scudd in an ominously amiable mood.

"What about these famous papers of yours, Mr Deene? I've been reading your book about the crime mysteries of history and I can see hidden papers are very much in your line."

"I've told you, they're not exactly hidden. If you like we'll go this morning and get them?"

"I see nothing against it."

Both men were being elaborately casual. Carolus knew that the policeman wanted to secure what information he could without revealing any himself, while Carolus was determined to give only if there was an adequate return. He foresaw a good deal of hedging and sparring.

"I hear you went to see Piggott yesterday," said Scudd as Carolus drove away.

"Yes."

"What did you make of him?"

"He looked pretty cheerful. Doesn't seem to have much to worry about."

"Oh, doesn't he? I should be sorry if I ever had what he has."

"Yes? Something new turned up?"

"There's always something new."

"Getting him linked up with Ratchett's death, perhaps? That's the trickier one. Not a vestige of motive, is there? How are you ever going to convince a jury when there's no motive?"

"There is a motive."

Carolus caught the scent, but did not leap to the pursuit.

"Yes, but nothing worth speaking of," he said.

"To you, five thousand nicker may not be worth speaking of, Mr Deene. To me it's a lot of money."

"And to Piggott, of course. But how did he know he was going to get it?"

"Ratchett must have told him. A man doesn't make a will like that and not tell the beneficiary."

Carolus was delighted with this scrap of information, but resolved that Scudd should not know it was new to him.

"I heard it was rather less," he said.

"We don't know to a penny, of course. But it can't be much less. So don't tell me there was no motive. I hear you've done a bit of enquiring about this man Tramper?"

"Unpleasant oaf."

"Formed any conclusions about him?"

"He's a second-rate crook."

"Yes, but in connection with the case, I mean?"

"I don't know what his record is. What convictions has he had?"

"Only two. One for fraud; the other, oddly enough, for Causing Grievous Bodily Harm with Intent to Maim."

"Really? You wouldn't think it to look at him, would you?"

"Mr Deene, when you've had the experience I have you will know better than to be influenced by appearances. Do you think Tramper has any connection with the murder of Lord Penge, or not?"

"Direct connection? No."

"Yet you spent quite a time on him. Are you making for Bexhill?"

"Yes."

"I thought it would more likely be Eastbourne."

"Did you? Wonderful morning, isn't it?"

"Wonderful," said Scudd, and it might have been 'Amen'.



They drove in silence for some time.

"I hope to be able to tell you more this evening," said Carolus with an irritating air of being kind. "You are coming to my little gathering, I hope?"

"Yes," said Scudd. "Having read that book of yours I don't think I ought to miss it. But frankly, I don't expect to learn much. We work, as you know, on rather more strict principles."

"Quite. This is our destination."

Carolus had drawn up before the pretentious façade of the Royal and Colonial bank.

"I see. A strong-box?" queried Scudd.

"Yes. Ratchett's." Carolus drew out the key and handed it to Scudd.

"I don't know what authority you have to possess this," observed the Inspector, the policeman coming out in him.

"Nor do I, quite. The important thing for both of us is that it's here. You can get past the manager."

They were shown in to Mr Flinch almost immediately.

"This is Inspector Scudd of the CID," said Carolus. "He is investigating the deaths of Michael Ratchett and Lord Penge."

Mr Flinch shone, but not with pleasure.

"I hardly know how I can have any information, Inspector Rer. Ratchett had an account here, but Lord Penge did not."

"Ratchett has a strong-box, I think?"

This direct reference to anything so secret seemed to pain Mr Flinch.

"That is a matter . . . It's not always easy . . . Inspector Rer. I have already explained to Mis-ter Rer here . . ."

"He had a strong-box?"

"Well, yes."

"I require to open it and take charge of any documents it may contain."

"Really . . . I scarcely know. This is quite unprecedented in my experience."

"This is the key," said Scudd. "Here is my card of authority. I shall, of course, sign for anything I may have to remove."

"Yes, I quite understand, Inspector-or Rer. But it is . . ."

"Could we get this open now?" said the Inspector. "I have not a great deal of time."

Mr Flinch stood up in all the shining splendour of his bright bald head and bright stiff linen.

"Very well," he said, and led the way.

When they were in the car, Scudd handed Carolus the packet of documents he had removed from Ratchett's strong-box.

"I'll keep my word," he said. "But we'd better stop on the road for a few minutes while you look at these. Once I've handed them in at the Station I can't show them to anybody."

"I quite see that."

They pulled in to the roadside. It was at such a moment that Carolus's academic training was most useful to him. Accustomed to extracting the data he needed from many miscellaneous sources, he could draw his information now from this bundle in far less time than would be required by most people. He took some pencilled notes and in a quarter of an hour was ready to drive on.

"Got what you wanted?" asked Scudd.

"I've got what I feared. This is a rotten business, Scudd."

"Just realized that? Of course it is. More rotten than you know yet."

Back in the house, Carolus went straight up to his room. He could not bear the prospect of another large meal with the family, particularly now that Gorringer would be present. He phoned down to Chilham and asked for something simple on a tray in his room, as he would be working there for the next few hours. He should have been more specific, for at one o'clock Chilham ushered in the German girls with trays and Carolus found himself faced with a crab bisque, braised sturgeon, a fillet steak with mushrooms, and

gooseberry tart. No one enjoyed good food more than he did, but the ten lean years of wartime and after had left him, like most Englishmen, unable to do justice to it in quantities natural to other races.

When the last plates had been removed and he was alone with a pot of black coffee, he drew out his notes and began his final co-ordination and preparation of them for the statement he meant to make that evening.

He knew that in this, more than in any case he had tackled, his explanation would mean a severe ordeal, not only for others, but for himself. His listeners would be, officially, the guests of Eustace and Lady Penge. Certain of them would be present under protest, only attending because their absence might be unkindly interpreted. But for most of them the chief emotion would be an avid curiosity. Naturally enough they wanted to know what really had happened.

He waited till six o'clock struck from the little clock-tower over the stables. It should have been a pleasant and peaceful sound, but it seemed to Carolus harsh and peremptory. He could postpone revelation no longer.

MR GORRINGER was waiting for him in the hall. It was evident that the headmaster felt it incumbent upon him to act as a kind of chairman or entrepreneur.

"Remembering the last occasion on which you delivered yourself in this way, my dear Deene, I have persuaded the Detective Inspector in charge of the case to take certain precautions. You will remember that at the time I refer to an attempt was made on your life. Detective Inspector Scudd—a very civil and competent officer, I imagine—was not willing at first to take my representations very seriously, but wiser counsels have prevailed. There will be a plain-clothes man stationed at the door of the library and one at the french windows. You need fear no violence or attempt to escape."

"Thank you."

"Mind you, if, as you say, you intend to name the person responsible for the death of Lord Penge . . ."

"I said largely responsible. I did not say that his murderer would be present."

"Ah, but you did not deny it, Deene. I have become accustomed to the evasive language you employ until the moment of revelation. If, as I say, I find myself in the room with a person even partially responsible for my old friend's death, I cannot be answerable for my own actions. However, your audience awaits you. We are eager for the truth."

Carolus found that the library had been arranged as a small auditorium. The desk at which Lord Penge had been wont to sit had been turned to face the room and cleared for Carolus. Seats had then been put in rows to accommodate the score or more of people present.

The family occupied the front row—the orchestra stalls, as it were. Gorringer joined Lady Penge here, and Eustace sat on her other side. Dr Chilham was beside Hermione, and Lockyer with Ronald.

Carolus looked carefully over the anxious faces turned towards him. He saw that even those whose attendance had seemed most problematic were here, and for the first time saw Worsdyke with his sensible wife. Worsdyke himself looked a sensible man, composed and serious. Tramper was next to them, rather puffy and comatose, as though he had had too much to drink at mid-day. He had returned to Highcastle that morning, as Carolus had predicted he would.

Carolus checked carefully, then asked, "Where is Wilpey?"

It was Chilham who answered:

"I thought it desirable to leave someone in the hall, sir, in case of callers. As Wilpey seemed to have no connection with the matter I selected him."

"I should like him here," said Carolus firmly.

One of the German girls went out and returned with an embarrassed-looking Wilpey, who took a place at the back of the room.

Carolus was pleased to see Scudd with a younger assistant.

He began to talk quietly but clearly, as though he were addressing one of his classes at school.

"I came to this case unwillingly," he said, "refusing to be involved in it when it seemed merely a matter of threats and agreeing only when there was a murder to investigate. That may seem wrong to some of you, and I think I should explain it. All I had to offer in this or any other mystery is a lucky facility for discovering the identity of a murderer when this is puzzling to others. I would not presume to do something which the police can do far better than I. I make no apology for considering criminal investigation a hobby, though in this case it has been a sad one. I came here in order to find out who had killed Michael Ratchett

and with no other purpose in view at all. I told that plainly to Lord Penge and to his elder son.

"As soon as I began to investigate the circumstances of Ratchett's death and the anonymous letters which had preceded it, I became aware of something which always seems to me highly suspicious. There was a kind of compulsion here to give the thing a certain specific explanation. I was being persuaded—coerced almost—into accepting a particular view, and instinctively distrusted it. Lord Penge had received anonymous letters threatening his life. They had become more and more insistent and urgent, till one had been posted in the village containing the threat of imminent action. Then Ratchett at a time and in circumstances in which he could be easily mistaken for Lord Penge was shot dead. The implication was that the murderer had made a mistake and shot the wrong man.

"I began to play with an interesting supposition, rejecting for the moment the theory I was clearly intended to accept and which others accepted without question. Suppose, I said, the murderer did nothing of the sort. Suppose he intended to shoot Ratchett. Suppose he was someone who had a motive for killing Ratchett but none for killing Lord Penge. Suppose he believed that murderers were always identified (as they most often are) by motive. Suppose, therefore, he committed his crime in a way that would look like a mistake. Who would suspect him? If he was someone who in no circumstances would harm Lord Penge but whose motive for killing Ratchett was known or could easily be discovered, it would be an ingenious way of averting suspicion from himself.

"As soon as this idea had formed I saw how well it accorded with the circumstances of the murder. These, to say the least of it, left a lot of room for enquiry. Ratchett was shot in the back, presumably as he went towards his cottage to fetch something for Lord Penge. The murderer was supposed (and I thought and still think rightly supposed) to have stood beside a certain tree. All evidence

agrees that it was an unusually dark night, but according to Lord Penge's calculation Ratchett left him about lighting-up time. Now how could a murderer concealed behind a tree mistake the identity of a man who had just passed within six yards of him? And if it was so dark that he could mistake his identity, how could he, a moment later, have seen well enough to shoot him dead at fifteen yards? It was a gross and insuperable inconsistency. I decided provisionally that whoever had shot Michael Ratchett had intended to shoot him and no one else. The anonymous letters and all the rest of it were an elaborate blind to deceive us into thinking that he intended to shoot Lord Penge and had shot Ratchett by mistake.

"At this point the case began to interest me, because I was up against a murderer with a good deal of ingenuity. At first it seemed that all I had to do was to identify him and the case was over. He had fulfilled his purpose and therefore was no longer dangerous. But I began to suppose again. Suppose he saw that I suspected the truth. Suppose he saw that the anonymous letters were not enough to convince me or others that he had shot the wrong man. Suppose he felt himself in danger of discovery. What else could he do to make his deception more convincing? Obviously only one thing—actually murder Lord Penge. That at least would show that the first murder had been a mistake. That, if nothing else, would deflect suspicion from him of his deliberately shooting Ratchett.

"I was not sure that this would occur to him, or that if it did he would follow the course of action I have suggested. But there seemed to me sufficient probability of it to constitute a threat to Lord Penge. So until I could identify the man—or woman, I am only saying 'he' for convenience sake—I did not advise anyone that the murderer had shot his bolt and would not strike again.

"You will observe that my theory did not minimize the importance of the anonymous letters. Though they were not what they seemed, they were still a part of the scheme

to murder Ratchett and had presumably been sent by or for the murderer. But I did not think this likely to be a fruitful line of investigation. Whoever had sent them would have taken ordinary precautions, typing them on a standard paper, using a standard typewriter and so on. They had been posted in London on mid-week days and afterwards in Highcastle. Their wording suggested someone educated trying to sound like a maniac or a murderer, but could have been a natural form of expression. *Anybody* could in fact have been responsible for them.

"But when I came to the circumstances of the actual murder I found them more revealing. Ratchett had been brought to the house that afternoon by Eustace, so that his car would not be standing, as usual when he was there, on the gravel in front. He started work with Lord Penge at five, and after a couple of hours, as Lord Penge said, started off for his cottage to fetch a document needed, borrowing Lord Penge's very noticeable overcoat and leaving by the french windows in the library. Some five minutes later—he could not be more accurate—Lord Penge heard two shots in the park, took a torch, hurried out and at a certain spot about halfway across the park found the body of Ratchett face downwards, his head in the direction of his cottage and his hands in his overcoat pockets.

"He had been killed at a range of about fifteen yards by a Savage 30·30 rifle of his own which was later found in a pond nearby. The most noteworthy thing about that was that the pond was *between the place of the murder and the house*, suggesting rather forcibly that the murderer had returned to the house after firing and not made for the road. He would have been in a hurry and would not wait to go twenty-five yards out of his way to throw the rifle in a pond from which it would be recovered anyway. This rifle had been taken from Ratchett's cottage, where it was usually kept unlocked.

"So far, but for the lack of motive, it could have been any single one of you. None of your alibis was worth a



light. If we go back and suppose that it was still just possible that Ratchett was shot in mistake for Lord Penge, there were a good many of you with something that could have been a motive. So I considered each of you in turn.

"Eustace, for instance, told his sister towards seven o'clock that he was going out to the stables, but, as Spotter told me, he did not arrive . . ."

Spotter was on his feet.

"No, I never said nothing of the sort, or if I did it wasn't nothing Mr Eustace wouldn't have not minded. No one ought to go not keeping quiet about anything said, and I wouldn't not want Mr Eustace to think I wouldn't say nothing if it . . ."

Carolus interrupted:

"You've nothing to worry about, Spotter. Mr Eustace told me himself afterwards that he did not go to the stables but was with Lockyer in the park looking for Ronald. But, as you see, he had no alibi, nor had Lockyer.

"Hermione's alibi was Chilham, and Chilham's Hermione. According to Chilham he was asked by Hermione to bring drinks for her and Eustace to the morning-room and did so. He found her alone and stayed chatting for 'about a quarter of an hour', during which time Mrs Murdoe, with whom he had been playing bezique, was left alone. Any of those three, therefore, *could* have done it so far as their actual physical presence was concerned.

"Then, again, Gribbley's alibi was provided only by Piggott's, and Piggott's only by Gribbley. They were in Gribbley's flat at about seven-thirty when Lord Penge phoned, but there was nothing but their own words to show where they had been till then.

"It might, as I say, have been any one of you, even Lord Penge himself or Lady Penge . . ."

There was a mighty rumbling as Mr Gorringer cleared his throat.

"Let us, my dear Deene, not enter the realms of fantasy," he said.

"It could," continued Carolus, "have been Ronald, who was in the park at the time. It could have been Spotter, who claims to have been in the stables but has no witness to his presence there. Then, by what you may wish to think was an unfortunate coincidence, Worsdyke and Mrs Worsdyke were in Highcastle that day. Trampler had been up to the house an hour earlier. There was no reason to suppose that Doctor Chilham was over here, but for all I knew he could have been. Wilpey, the valet, claimed to have been ironing trousers in the presence of Frieda, but again the alibis are only mutual. Mrs Carker and Mrs Spotter have no witnesses to show that they were alone in their cottages. . . ."

"Oh, haven't they?" asked Mrs Spotter belligerently. "I'd like to know who told you that. It doesn't mean because Spotter wasn't there no one else was, so don't be too sure of yourself, Mr Know-All."

"Who was?" shouted Spotter furiously. "Who was there with you? I knew it! I've never not known what you weren't up to, nor not doubted it, not for a minute, I haven't. Who was it?"

Mr Gorringer turned to them.

"This is no place for your discussion," he said. "Pray postpone it till a more appropriate moment."

"Not if you wasn't . . ."

"Silence!" shouted Mr Gorringer, and Spotter subsided muttering.

"So you see," continued Carolus, "with nothing like good old-fashioned clues, or footprints, or finger-prints to help me, I was driven to the only way left to discover Ratchett's murderer. I had to find a motive. At this time I almost lost faith in my theory, so impossible did it seem that anyone should have a motive for killing Ratchett. But I set about finding out what I could about him. In this Mrs Carker was very helpful."

"She would be," Mrs Spotter was heard to say bitterly.

"From Mrs Carker, from Lord Penge, from Chilham, from Wilpey and from my own observation I learned a great deal about the murdered man. Lord Penge told me that six months ago he had made over five thousand pounds to Ratchett to avoid death duties. Ratchett had been with Lord Penge for twelve years, since he came out of the Army. He did not seem to have been a very inspiring individual, for his death left no apparent gap in the life here." Only Piggott and Lord Penge were mentioned as calling on him from time to time, and with Piggott, said Mrs Carker, he was 'very thick'. I learned later that he had made a will in Piggott's favour. Lord Penge told me that Ratchett was the son of his firm's agent in Buenos Aires and that when he, Penge, had been out there as a young man, Ratchett had been too young to appear with his family at night.

"Then I heard from Mrs Carker that about a year ago Ratchett's mother died in Buenos Aires and that her property had been sent home to her son. There were a great number of documents which Ratchett went through, but *none of them was left in his cottage*. This at once caught my attention, because when a man so careless with his guns and other possessions that he does not even lock them up removes certain papers altogether, it suggests that they are of considerable value or importance to him. When I discovered later that he had a private account with a bank in Bexhill and obtained the information that he had a strong-box there, it didn't need much guesswork to know where these papers were. I have been able to examine them, and will refer to them later.

"Then I learnt from Wilpey, who had obtained the information from Frieda, who had overheard talk between Lord and Lady Penge, that Ratchett had been some kind of a bone of contention between them.

"All this was interesting, but it still did not do much to narrow the field. Then I realized that I had two really vital pieces of information which took me a long way

towards identifying the murderer. The first had come from Mrs Carker. It was that at about seven, or shortly after, someone had hurried into Ratchett's cottage and hurried out again. Mrs Carker had supposed at the time it was Ratchett, but when she knew how he had been shot with his own gun she decided that it was the murderer, who had come to steal it. The last notion seemed to me most unlikely. A man who has come for a gun with which to kill another does not bang in and out of his cottage switching on the light, not caring who sees or hears him

"The second thing came from Ronald. At the time fixed for Ratchett's murder he was in the park, 'about a hundred yards from the ponds', when he saw Ratchett suddenly lit up by the light of a torch. Ratchett was walking towards his cottage with 'his hands up like someone being held up at pistol point in a film'.

"These two pieces of information convinced me that the murder had not happened, as had been supposed, while Ratchett was going over to his cottage, but when he was coming back. It was not done by someone who mistook him for Lord Penge, but by someone waiting for him with a torch who held him up, caused him to start walking back to the cottage and then shot him in cold blood.

"There was a third thing that I did not find out till later. Tramper, about whom I shall have something to say later, was trying to obtain money from Lord Penge through Ratchett on most improbable and improper grounds. At first, Tramper told me, Ratchett told him it was out of the question, but that was highly indicative to me. One way or another, though I had no proof yet, I was pretty sure who had shot Michael Ratchett.

"Now I think, if you don't mind, I will break off for a few minutes and have a drink."

There was an immediate outbreak of conversation. The family in the front row remained silent and rather tense, but behind them Mrs Carker, an important figure for the

moment, could be heard saying that she had thought to herself she might as well say all she knew and have done with it. Mrs Spotter, on the other hand, loudly disputed her claim to have known anything at all. The police spoke together in low tones; they looked quite unruffled.

Mr Gorringer crossed to Carolus.

"Lucid, so far, Deene," he said, "but I think you should have made your revelation by now."

"I have, virtually. Isn't it obvious to you? All right—you shall hear in a few moments."

Then he resumed:

"I knew these facts about the murderer of Ratchett," he said. "One, that he had some very adequate motive, for the murder was premeditated. Two, that he had built up an elaborate situation which would make it appear that he was mistaking Ratchett for Penge. Three, that he was someone who had an opportunity to take Ratchett's rifle. Four, that he knew how to use it—was, in fact, a fair shot. Five, that he knew Ratchett would be coming along that path at that moment. Six, that he would have an opportunity to arrange the corpse in a certain way after shooting, since when Ronald had seen Ratchett his hands were above his head, and the hands of the corpse were in his overcoat pockets. Moreover, if Ratchett had gone to the cottage to fetch something, as Lord Penge said, the murderer had had time to remove whatever it was from Ratchett's person. Eight, that he knew Ratchett would be wearing Lord Penge's distinctive overcoat. Nine, quite obviously, that he was someone who could have been in the park, on the spot, at that moment. Ten, that he was someone with enough *sang-froid* not to have given himself away that evening or thereafter. Eleven, that he was someone who would never be suspected of wanting to kill Lord Penge, but someone who was afraid of being suspected of wanting to kill Ratchett. Twelve, that he had had the opportunity of typing and sending the anonymous letters. Thirteen, and most deadly, that he was someone with the determination,

the callousness, the desperation and the black courage to commit a murder of this kind.

“You will all see at once that there was only one person in existence to whom *all* those could apply. It was Lord Penge himself.”

## 20

THOUGH CAROLUS supposed that his audience had long perceived where his thirteen points were leading, even that several of them had been expecting that name for a long time, he found that his statement had fallen with almost atomic force among them.

Eustace was on his feet shouting something like "You dare!" or "How dare you?" Hermione was crying and Ronald in his thin, high-pitched tones shouted, "It's a lie!"

Mr Gorringer made his voice heard.

"Outrageous, Deene, outrageous! Before Lady Penge, too. If this is some of your ill-timed levity, you will answer for it, sir!"

From the back of the room came a hum and worry of indignation. "What a thing to say!" "There!" "Fancy saying that!" "What a liberty!"

. When the first outpourings were subsiding Lady Penge spoke.

"Please go on, Mr Deene," she said.

"I'm afraid what follows will be very painful to you, Lady Penge."

"I'm well aware of it. I wish you to continue."

"Very well. As you wish. Lord Penge murdered Ratchett for a very good reason. Ratchett was blackmailing him. I first suspected this when I heard that within six months of his receiving these mysterious papers from Buenos Aires, Ratchett had obtained five thousand pounds from his employer on the plea that it was to avoid death duties. I became more sure of it when I heard from Wilpey some of the words used between Lord and Lady Penge in a quarrel which was overheard by Frieda. I maintain that

those words could bear no construction other than this—that Lady Penge had discovered what it was Ratchett knew about her husband which enabled him to draw money. Exactly what this was I do not intend to reveal now, since it is a private matter for the family, but I must say that my suspicions have been confirmed without a doubt by the papers taken by Detective Inspector Scudd from a strong-box rented by Ratchett at the Royal and Colonial Bank, Bexhill. They provide proof that Lord Penge did something during his three years in Argentina as a young man which, if it was revealed in later life, would ruin him and hurt his family. Ratchett had discovered this, and was using it for his own advantage.

“So Lord Penge decided to kill Ratchett, making it appear to be an act by someone who wanted to murder him, Lord Penge. I think he probably had all the anonymous letters typed ready before he began and possibly others, to allow for all contingencies. My guess would be that he bought a second-hand typewriter specially for the purpose and got rid of it again afterwards. It was unlucky that Trampler had one of the same make and age, for this caused me some extra trouble in checking that the letters had not been typed on it. Owing to the elaborate security arrangements Lord Penge had made for the Manor post, he was able to send the last one to himself without leaving the house. The earlier ones had all been posted on days when he was in London.

“I must own that when I saw Lady Penge secretly posting a letter on the day before the last anonymous one was received I did for a moment wonder . . .”

“Shame!” cried Mr Gorringer.

“But I realized afterwards that she was writing to her cousin, because she was not sure of the Manor phone, to make arrangements to get her, at all costs, out of that house for a time. The cousin was to answer any queries with the statement that she had begged Lady Penge to come at once.”



"Perfectly right," said Lady Penge.

"So the thing was organized; but then Lord Penge came up against a snag. The police did not take his anonymous letters very seriously, and it looked as though he would have difficulty in convincing anyone that they were real and earnest when the time came. It was essential that the crime should be watched by someone intelligent enough to think that the murderer intended to kill Lord Penge but not intelligent enough to see that this was a double bluff. So, not having a very high opinion of Mr Gorringer's discrimination, he asked him to invite an amateur detective he had mentioned as clever. That was me. I refused, and he decided to go ahead. He believed he was successful, and was not at all pleased when Mr Gorringer said that now there was a corpse I was coming. But his displeasure, like most emotions of his, he concealed.

"On the Sunday before the day he had picked for the murder, Lord Penge went across to Ratchett's cottage. He had taken to frequent calls there lately to prevent any particular one being noticeable and to give probability to the idea that the murderer could mistake someone walking across there for him. He was wearing, according to the observant Mrs Carker, a particularly long overcoat, and he left, according to the same authority, after it was dark. I have no doubt it was at this time that he appropriated Ratchett's Savage 30.30.

"Then came the afternoon of the murder. At something well past seven, when it was already dark, he suddenly discovered the need of a document which he knew was in Ratchett's cottage and sent the secretary across. We shall never know how he persuaded him to wear his coat, indeed I have played with the idea that he had punctured it ready and put it on Ratchett after death. More probably he said, "Don't wait to go to the hall for your coat; take mine." It is the same with Ratchett's glasses. Penge may have taken those off after death and brought them back to the library.

"At all events, when Ratchett left he followed him at a

distance and took up his position at the forked tree, exactly as the police decided the murderer did. His strict rule that no one should enter the library when he was working would ensure that his absence from the house was not known. When Ratchett returned he stopped him at gun-point. Again I can only guess but I daresay he said they were going over to Ratchett's cottage now to obtain and destroy those incriminating documents. If so, he told Ratchett to lead the way, and with the torch shining on him could easily kill him at fifteen yards.

"There is ~~some~~ something rather interesting here. Nobody except Lord Penge, who was supposed to be in a study behind closed doors, claimed definitely to have heard the shots. I wonder how many of you noticed that? At least eight people were within probable earshot, and three would certainly have heard them if they had been audible. But Lord Penge used the specially constructed silencer he had had made.

"He then went to the dead man, removed whatever document Ratchett had been to fetch and put the dead hands in the overcoat pockets. If he had left them as they probably were, spread out above the dead man's head, it would have shown that Ratchett had his hands up when he was shot and could have revealed the whole plot. He then removed the silencer, threw Ratchett's gun in one of the ponds and returned to the house. He sent Gribbley and Piggott over to the corpse and, as he told me, gave himself a stiff whisky and soda. He had accomplished what he set out to do.

"So, you see, Lord Penge fulfilled all my thirteen points. He had a most adequate motive. Lady Penge had the same, and so in a way had Eustace, had he but known it. He had created the situation in which it would appear that he himself was the intended victim. He was perhaps the only person who had had an opportunity of taking Ratchett's rifle, which could only have been removed at night, when even Ratchett locked his cottage. He was a practised shot. He, *and he alone*, knew that Ratchett would be coming along that

path at that moment. He was, by his own admission, the first to reach the corpse and the only person who could move the hands and remove the document. He returned to the house. He was the only person who knew Ratchett was wearing his coat. He was perfectly able almost without fear of detection to be in the park before the murder and quite without question after it, for, as we have seen, he did not send Ratchett over till well after seven, when it was dark. He was certainly stoical enough to go through the rest of the evening without giving himself away. He could not possibly be suspected of wanting to kill Lord Penge and he was afraid that his reason for wanting to kill Ratchett could become known. He had had the opportunity to type and send the anonymous letters. He had, as one could see in his character, the qualities necessary for this murder, and with them the love of his family and pride in his position and theirs which made it necessary. He was the only person who fulfilled every one of these conditions. I don't know how all of you failed to see it."

"I must halt you there," said Mr Gorringer. "Can it be that you have mooted this monstrous suggestion about Lord Penge on nothing but the circumstantial tittle-tattle and personal opinion which you have put forward?"

"You'd better hear the rest," said Carolus. "But there'll be no comfort in it, for you or anyone else."

There was a pause and Carolus continued:

"Out of sheer meticulousness and the habit of drawing up a report—a bad habit acquired in the Army—I went into details of the other persons who might have been considered suspects. A short chat with Mrs Worsdyke was all that was necessary to convince me that her husband was not even remotely concerned in the matter, though by an unfortunate coincidence he was in Highcastle on the afternoon of the murder. I found that Tramper's story of his wife's death from food-poisoning was true, though there was nothing to show that it had been due to a product of Archer and Buck's. Tramper probably did ask Ratchett to obtain

a settlement of his nebulous claim, and it may even be true that Ratchett kept him hanging round with the idea of using him in some scheme of his own. Ratchett, on the previous occasion when he had obtained a large sum of money, was very careful to have cover for the transaction—the supposed anticipation of the will to avoid death duties—and it is conceivable that he wanted some such cover again and intended to make Tramper provide it. But that is only guesswork based on Tramper's statement that Ratchett gave him hopes. There was nothing whatever to connect him with the murder and a short acquaintance with him showed me that he had neither the determination nor even the ability to commit it. Chilham noticed that he was not sober when he called at the house little more than an hour before the shots. †

“But the elimination of suspects was a formality. I knew that no one but Lord Penge could have shot Ratchett, and if I needed more proof he soon provided it. He could see that neither the police nor I were quite convinced by the mistaken identity idea. Detective Inspector Scudd said to me in his hearing—‘We are not taking it as absolutely certain that Ratchett was shot in mistake for Lord Penge’, and I said much the same to Eustace, who no doubt repeated it. So he decided to give weight to the idea by a pretended attempt on his life.

“This was not easy to fake. He couldn't just come into the house with a bullet-hole through his hat and say he had been shot at. He decided to do the thing by poisoning, but then did not see how he could ‘discover’ this convincingly. What he did in the end was as ingenious as the rest of his actions and gives a hint of the reason for his remarkable success in early life. He added poison to the medicine which Chilham brought him each day at seven, and instead of replacing the bottle on the tray, left it on the writing-table beside it. This would be noticeable to Chilham, but would not disprove the idea of a murderer having entered the room and poisoned the medicine. He opened one of the

windows, which in any case stuck at that point, about a foot. Then, leaving only his eyes uncovered between something black wrapped round his face and an unfamiliar hat pulled down, he left the library by the french windows and peered in at the morning-room where Hermione would almost certainly be. If he had been seen by anyone he would have explained that he had heard or seen or suspected an intruder in the library, which would have produced the same effect, though less convincingly. His calling Chilham in front of me and letting him of his own accord notice the misplaced medicine bottle was a masterly touch. Had I not by then been convinced that he had murdered Ratchett, I should have been deceived by it.

"The next incident which seemed to be significant was the second appearance to Hermione of a face at the morning-room window. I might have been more alarmed by it if I had not noticed that afternoon that Spotter had lit a fire in the little sitting-room over the stables where he had once lived. Knowing Spotter's devotion to horse-lovers, and being with him when Hermione telephoned instructions to him, I guessed that this might be done for her sake, for what better place could there be in which to meet the man to whom she is now engaged? But how was he to reach the stables? There were two plain-clothes men watching for just such an intrusion. Hermione could not leave the house for long without a good reason, and since the murder of Ratchett had made difficulties she probably had not been able to see Doctor Chilham. So when she was called to the phone that day (it was noticeable, by the way, that Chilham came and summoned her instead of putting the call through to her) she told her young friend to cross from the road at exactly ten past seven. She then created a diversion by pretending to have seen the face at the window again and urgently sending for the two plain-clothes men to tell them about it. Noticing this, I wandered out to the stables and was in time to see Doctor Chilham come in and go upstairs. . . ."

"Once again I must interrupt," said Mr Gorringer. "You have collected more than a score of people, including the bereaved widow and heir, to hear one thing—*who killed Lord Penge*. We have listened to a rigmarole of nonsense by which you have sought to convince us that he himself was a cold-blooded murderer, but you have thrown no light at all on the essential question. I am sure that everyone present, including the members of the Police Force, is as weary of these slanders as I am. If you have nothing to say, Mr Deene, let us draw a curtain on this most unfortunate and for me humiliating occasion."

"Yes," said Eustace. "Who killed my father?"

"I did," said Carolus calmly, "or at least, I was largely responsible for his death. I caused him to commit suicide."

Once again there was an angry outbreak. Once again Lady Penge quelled it by insisting that Carolus should continue.

"You are very brave, dear lady," said Mr Gorringer. "But if Mr Deene has nothing better to offer, I suggest that we adjourn. A child could see that it was not suicide. There was no weapon beside the body."

Carolus ignored this.

"I was faced with a hateful situation," he said. "I believed myself to be the only person who suspected Lord Penge of Ratchett's murder. What was my duty? Immediately to give the police the information in my hands? Or to drop the case on the plea that blackmail justifies murder? Or what? If I did the first, there would be, for the family, the hideous experience of a famous trial in which they would all appear as witnesses. The very thing which Lord Penge had murdered to safeguard—the future of his son—would be completely ruined, and there would be other consequences in the family which I need not specify. On the other hand, if I decided to forget the whole thing I should be betraying something which to me is far dearer: the ideal of historical truth. For that, frankly, I would

suffer myself or cause others to suffer. It was against all my principles to shield a murderer.

"In the end I decided on a compromise. I did not mind cheating the hangman so long as I did not cheat myself. A louse for the hangman, I said. I let Lord Penge know that I knew the truth, and left it to him to act. I thought that in all probability he would commit suicide, and I'm bound to say I thought this would be the best solution. But I did not anticipate what happened. I did not realize that on the subject of his family and the future of his family he was not sane.

"I told him that on the following day I was going to reveal the truth. Hoping against hope, he continued to question me to confirm that I knew this, and I made it even clearer, adding that I had already posted away my notes on the case. I also told him that I was aware of Ratchett's strong-box, which meant to him that I not only knew of his crime but suspected its motive. But all this was no more than the final confirmation to him. He had already decided, I believe. He was perfectly cool, and I think in a mad way courageous about it.

"I use the word 'mad'. It is the kindest one for his actions from now on. Determined as he was that as little shadow as possible should fall on his family, he decided that he must appear to have been murdered, and went to the length of providing two suspects for the crime. He called Lockyer late that evening and representing that he was afraid of the threats to his life and meant to hide for a time, sent the tutor to his shooting-box in the Highlands. Lockyer must start at once, he said, this very night, and drive straight to Achendouroch. He would follow. Lockyer in all innocence set off and reached Achendouroch, where he saw no newspapers for some days and did not know that the police wanted to question him till I drove up and found him there.

"But before this Lord Penge had sent for Piggott and pretending regret for a quarrel of that afternoon told him to take the next day off, lending him the truck on the con-

dition that he left early for Brighton in order to deliver a letter to Mr Gorringer at the Sandringham Private Hotel. It must be there by eight o'clock, he said, and this meant that Piggott would leave before daylight.

"When Lockyer was leaving, Penge accompanied him to the garages, and as soon as he had gone took his own Savage 30-30 with its silencer from its hiding-place in the garage in which Lockyer kept his car."

"You're wrong there," interrupted Lockyer.

"Oh? Hadn't he hidden the Savage in advance?"

"No. He carried it with him when he came with me to the garages. Said it might be useful in self-defence and he never moved from the house nowadays without it. That seemed natural enough to me."

"Yes. It would have seemed so to me. But you didn't tell me that."

"I'd completely forgotten it till now."

"The truck in which Piggott would leave next morning was standing there. Lord Penge went to the back of this and, facing in the same direction as the truck, leaned on the tailboard. He then put the barrel of the rifle to his head so that after the shot the rifle would fall into the truck, while he would fall behind it. He was wearing gloves to leave no finger-prints on the rifle. He pressed the trigger.

"The result was, as you know, disastrous for Piggott. That young man came out to the garage in which there was no electric light, soon after six o'clock next morning. He did as we all do with our cars, jumped in without looking inside it or behind it. He then drove away quite unconscious of the fact that he left Lord Penge's body on the ground behind him and carried the rifle which killed him in his truck. When he was arrested that morning he still did not know it was there.

"There is one mystery left here. The letter which he took to Mr Gorringer's private hotel never reached him."

"Must I repeat it, Deene? *There was no letter.*"

"I had hoped that Lord Penge's conscience was not quite



so blind as that. I thought perhaps he had sent to Mr Gorringer, an old and valued friend, some instructions on how to act if either Piggott or Lockyer were in real and immediate danger of trial or execution for his murder. But it seems I was wrong. Lord Penge was perfectly prepared to let one or both of these young men be hanged for a crime of which they are equally innocent."

It was clear that Mr Gorringer was suffering agonies of doubt. The whole monstrous edifice of his faith in the bloater-paste king was cracking, but had not quite fallen. It had been such an important feature in his own life, the present eminence of a one-time fellow-undergraduate, that he could not reconcile himself to its loss so quickly. But he was not a complete fool, and a part of him knew that Carolus was right.

"A solemn promise made to a doomed man . . ." he began.

"Did you see Lord Penge that night?" asked Carolus excitedly.

"No. No. The telephone. A solemn promise to one who has passed on is not to be lightly broken."

"Oh, he rang you up. He *did* make some provision for the protection of Piggott and Lockyer if they needed it. What was it?"

"If you are prepared to assure me, Deene, that two human lives may depend on it, I have no alternative. I must break my vow."

"Certainly I assure you that at least one life depends on it. Piggott has been charged with murder. I saw him yesterday."

"Then it shall be done! Lord Penge telephoned me and said that he was sending me in the early morning an envelope addressed to me. This would contain another envelope, sealed. He required my word of honour as his oldest friend that the seal would only be broken if he should be killed and Piggott or Lockyer found guilty of his murder. He also bound me by a most sacred promise of secrecy in the

matter, a secrecy only to be broken if one of the two men was in danger of execution."

"He was prepared to go as far as that, was he? Let's have a look at the letter."

Mr Gorringer thrust his hand into his breast pocket and dramatically drew out a sealed envelope and handed it to Carolus.

"I wash my hands of it," he said.

Carolus glanced at the contents, while everybody in the room kept a tense silence.

"As I thought, a full confession of the murder of Ratchett. Here, you'd better have it, Inspector. It'll clear young Piggott."

Carolus felt exhausted by the strain of his long and painful statement and took little notice as the company disbanded. He did not want to hear their comments, he did not want to see them again or Highcastle Manor or any of its inhabitants. At that moment he did not want ever to investigate another murder.

He found himself at last alone with Lady Penge, Gorringer and Eustace.

"And what was it, Mr Deene, that Ratchett knew about my father?" asked Eustace.

"I think your mother knows that and will tell you herself."

"No. You tell us. I know no details," said Lady Penge.

"Your father was a very young man when he was sent out to Argentina. He seems to have done what better and worse young men have done before and since—married a prostitute. She was an Englishwoman called Ivy Smith, and she had a small son by a former associate of hers. She left your father after a time and returned to her profession, but in the meantime he had persuaded his firm's agent and his wife, a childless couple named Ratchett, to adopt the boy. Before leaving Argentina your father did what he could to find his wife in order to dissolve their marriage, but he failed in this and in every subsequent attempt to find her. Since the

average life-time of a prostitute in Argentina at that time was a very short one, he was perhaps justified in supposing her dead when he married your mother, but as she was never officially 'presumed dead' the marriage was not a legal one.

"Ratchett at first knew nothing of this or of his own parentage. He always believed himself to be the son of the Ratchetts and knew Lord Penge by name from them. He obtained his post here through this.

"Then a year ago his real mother died, leaving what she had to him, and with her possessions was sent to him her marriage certificate. I saw this today, together with certain other documents. The marriage certificate proved, of course, that his marriage to your mother was bigamous, and therefore disproved your right to inherit the title. It was on this that Ratchett secured his five thousand pounds. Though we have no evidence of it, we must suppose that Ratchett, like most blackmailers, was insatiable. It was to end that situation and secure your right to succeed to the title that your father murdered Ratchett. You see, he had that dangerous form of paranoia, an ambition for dynasty-founding. It seemed to him the most important thing in the world that there should be a second Lord Penge.

"There is one curious little footnote to that. Ratchett, as you all observed, was a reserved and probably lonely man. He had no living relatives. Only one person seemed to go out of his way sometimes to persuade him to talk, and that was Piggott, who used to visit him. Piggott was rewarded for that in Ratchett's will.

"That is absolutely all I know about this case, and I would rather we talked no more of it."

Mr Gorringer broke a long silence.

"What you have told us, Deene, has been a severe shock to us all. Since I carried, unbeknown to myself, Lord Penge's own confession of his crime, I can doubt no longer. But it has been a very terrible experience for us to learn what we have."

**"It has not been a very pleasant one for me, Headmaster."**

**"Sympathies are, perforce, divided, but I think we should resolve to remember Lord Penge's finer qualities and higher motives and more splendid achievements, and forget the one dreadful thing he persuaded himself to do. I think we should . . ."**

**"I think we should have a drink," said Lady Penge firmly and rang the bell for Chilham.**

**THE END**